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Issue 286
Holiday 2016

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2016's best

Welcome to an especially busy issue of PC Gamer. This month, we've got two *Dishonored* features for you, reviews of the latest games and all of our usual good stuff—but forget that for a moment. We've also got four pages of our writer Andy Kelly talking about toilets in games. No only that, but he interviewed some of the games industry's finest talent about them.

Are there any other household items in games you want Andy to write about? Freezers, perhaps. Enjoy the issue.

S.R.

SAMUEL ROBERTS
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Our team of writers



TONY ELLIS

Specialist in
Cats, stealth

This month
According to PCG's keeper of quality control, MGSV has ruined all games by being too good. Outrageous sentiment? You decide.



ANDY KELLY

Specialist in
Toilets, all toilets

Twitter
@ultrabright

This month
Wrote almost the entire feature section this month, including two on *Dishonored* alone.



PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Rivalries, bad cars

Twitter
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This month
Finally got to review a *Forza* game on PC, and can now throw his Xbox One in the trash.

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20 WATCH DOGS 2 PREVIEW

Edwin enjoys San Francisco but not the subject matter in Ubisoft's latest open-world game.

34 DISHONORED 2

Try to read this in-depth exploration of a new *Dishonored 2* level and not be excited. The only thing Andy likes more than a good immersive sim is a gaming toilet.

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Ed Chester takes a look at the best speaker sets you can buy for your PC.



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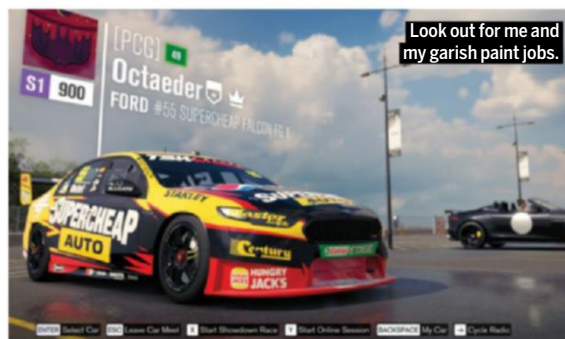
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You'll find my full review on page 60, but here's an early preview: *Forza Horizon 3* is one of the best racing games available on PC. If you're planning to visit Playground Games' gorgeous, fictionalized version of Australia, consider bringing some friends. *Horizon* uses *Forza*'s 'Drivatar' system, which populates your world with AI-controlled versions of other players. Put simply, even if you're playing solo, it's better to have a consistent set of names to compete against. That's why we've created the PC Gamer club, so your world can be filled with fellow PC Gamer readers.

Clubs are *Forza Horizon*'s community spaces—a bit like guilds, but for people who love cars. The PC Gamer club is open to anyone, of any skill level. We'll compete against each other on leaderboards, hang out in the in-game Car Meet, and appear in each other's singleplayer campaigns as vaguely defined AI approximations. You'll earn bonuses, too, even if you're not actively participating in online events. Simply earning XP will propel you up the club's rankings. Earn enough, and you'll be promoted to the next tier—gaining a fat stack of credits as a reward.

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competition that'll benefit you no matter how you like to play. Plus, as you earn XP, you'll be pushing PC Gamer up the overall club leaderboard, thus helping us to achieve our dream of beating IGN.

Clubs are limited to 1,000 members, so, if you want to join, don't delay. Head into *Forza Horizon 3* and search for PC Gamer in the Clubs tab of the pause menu. You'll earn rewards, find new people to compete against and, most importantly of all, help us to prove that we're better than IGN at racing fake cars around fake Australia. Everybody wins. ■

Phil Savage

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THE TOP STORY

UBI TAKES ITS TIME

ASSASSIN'S CREED and FAR CRY could skip 2017

Think back to 2009, when the adventures of Italian assassin Ezio Auditore da Firenze felt exciting and new. Seven years and seven games later, it's hard to recall the sense of anticipation the series once generated. I don't even remember what *Assassin's Creed Syndicate's* main character was called. Jefford, or something.

That's not a good place for a game series to be in, and Ubisoft knows this. Already the publisher has committed to letting the previously annual series skip a year. Now, according to Ubisoft vice-president of editorial, Tommy François, Ubi is prepared to let its flagship open-world franchise miss 2017 too. Talking to IGN, François admitted that *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* could both be on an extended leave of absence.

"I'll tell you what," François said, "we believe alpha for these games needs to be one year before release. We're trying to achieve that. That's super fucking blunt, I don't even know if I'm allowed to say this. This is the goal we're going for: alpha one year before, more quality, more polish." And if that means biting the bullet and not having an *Assassin's Creed* or a *Far Cry* in 2017? In François' words: "Fuck it."

I think it's a good move. Both games have settled into a set model and even share

**IT'S GREAT THAT UBISOFT
IS TAKING THE TIME TO
REASSESS AND REWORK
ITS TEMPLATE**

certain aspects of progression and structure. That repetition can only bring diminishing returns. It's great that Ubisoft is taking the time to reassess and rework its template.

In other Ubisoft sequel news, some more *Beyond Good & Evil 2* concept art emerged (see above). Creator Michel Ancel shared the image on Instagram, with a caption thanking Ubisoft for "making this possible". The last *BG&E2* news we heard was at E3, when Ubisoft's Yves Guillemot said, "Michel is working on it, but he's doing two games at the same time, he's doing *Wild* at the same time. It's coming along, but he has to spend more time on it so we can see it faster."

It's been 13 years since the original *Beyond Good & Evil* release. If Ubisoft is reading, I'd advise it finds some sort of middle-ground between annual sequels and taking over a decade. ■

Phil Savage

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THE SPY



The Spy knows what's inside the Traveler. (Space bees.)

This month, The Spy's routine trawl of PC Gamer's email servers unearthed a document containing an anonymous reader survey. The Spy browsed with interest through comments ranging from, "Get rid of The Spy," to "Seriously, 800 words of rambling, incoherent anecdotes is not a good format for delivering news." You might think such betrayal, er, feedback (The Spy now regrets using this keyboard's backspace key to mark a nearby dead drop) would cause The Spy to do something drastic. On the contrary, vindictive, er, dear reader, The Spy has never held a grudge. (Please discount any previous editions of The Spy in which The Spy has held a grudge.) Instead, The Spy is hesitant, er, eager to take on board your terrible, er, constructive criticism, and now brings you this issue's dispatch in a much more readable and informative format.

Item 1: **Destiny 2** could be coming to PC. The rumor comes from a NeoGAF user, and was supported by both Kotaku's Jason Schreier and infamous GAF whistleblower shinobi602. It

makes sense: Activision's hobbies include making money and PC releases are a way of doing that. If you're unfamiliar with the original, console-exclusive game, it's an online FPS starring resurrected space wizards who battle alien races for control of the ruins of the solar system. *Destiny* currently has plenty of problems, not least the memory constraints caused by its support of PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. For the sequel, Bungie reportedly wants to create something that feels totally new, with planets that feel more like real, populated spaces, rather than simply a series of interconnected maps. For all of *Destiny's* issues, it's a superb shooter and a well crafted sequel could be a big deal on PC.

Item 2: The Spy learned recently that tech millionaires are willing to spend large sums of money to

Item 4: CD Projekt Red's upcoming **Cyberpunk 2077** will likely have vehicles, given that the studio is hiring a "vehicle gameplay programmer". One of the requirements of the role will be to create "the whole architecture of vehicle-related code and the physics of driving/flying in those vehicles". There's not much more to say about this, but, while The Spy's on the subject of vehicles, The Spy would like to address some longstanding issues with the representation of vehicles in espionage. Do you know how heavy a functioning cloaking device is? Or a submarine mode? Or even just a retractable Gatling gun? These things will ruin the suspension of your conspicuously expensive Aston Martin DB5. The only recommended car attachments are deployable wheel spikes,

rear-firing oil slicks, and mechanical arms that hold a giant newspaper (with discreet eyeholes) over the windshield.

MAUVE OVER

Item 5: HQ, the mole has hidden their tracks well, but The Spy has narrowed the suspect list to owners of mauve

jumpers. A cursory search through security footage, personal effects and miscellaneous wardrobes reveals that no fewer than 200 operatives own mauve jumpers. How has this happened? Were mauve jumpers last spring's big fashion trend? Mauve isn't even a good color. It's barely more than a gray. Just because it's got a bit of purple in it, suddenly it thinks it's magenta? Wait, this is the wrong document. The Spy really needs to find a new backspace key.

Item 6: The Brazilian ratings board has listed **Bulletstorm: Full Clip Edition**, a remastered version of People Can Fly's enjoyably swearsy FPS. Normally, remastered editions are a bit pointless on PC. *Bulletstorm*, however, is still hobbled by Games for Windows Live, and no patches are planned for the original version, so this is welcome news.

Item 7: This was a bad idea. Next month, it'll be business as usual, backspace key and all. Spy out. ■ *The Spy*

ACTIVISION'S HOBBIES INCLUDE MAKING MONEY AND PC RELEASES ARE A WAY OF DOING THAT

enable the creation of politically-themed memes. Sensing a lucrative new source of private sector funding, The Spy has decided to run for local office disguised as either Doge, a socially awkward penguin, or Katy Perry's left shark, depending on who's trending the highest.

Item 3: **Sunset Overdrive** developer Insomniac Games would like to bring its over-the-top third-person action game to PC. In response to one hopeful fan's question on Twitter, the studio wrote, "We'd love it if it could happen but ball is in Xbox's court on it." Presuming that's an idiom, and Xbox hasn't been stealing balls from its development partners, it seems Insomniac needs Microsoft's blessing. That could actually happen: Microsoft has earmarked plenty of future releases for PC and even let *Quantum Break* make the jump to Steam.





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TOSHIBA
Leading Innovation >>>

Various scenarios are being tested in the game.

DIGITIZED
DIALOGUE

"A citizen dialogue that functions well is key for urban city planning, now and in the future," says Erik Kalmaru of Svensk Byggtjänst. "Computer games have shown to be an effective tool to build engagement and generate ideas, but also to visualize the process, and the workshops with gamers and city planners showed a series of possibilities for using *Cities: Skylines* as a tool in the development of proper cities. It can be used from the visualization of proposals to the design of the buildings [and] also to describe and discuss different functions and flows in the city. We look forward to seeing what using *Cities: Skylines* as a tool will generate in the future."

PCG INVESTIGATES

REACH FOR
THE SKYLINES

How **CITIES: SKYLINES** is being used to design a real-life district

Norra Djurgårdstaden is an area in central Stockholm that's currently undergoing substantial urban redevelopment. The Swedish Building Service, Svensk Byggtjänst, has partnered with city officials and, with a focus on long-term sustainability, the on-going initiative plans to add 12,000 new homes and 35,000 workspaces to the region in a bid to offset its ever-increasing population. How does this relate to the world of videogames? City-building simulator *Cities: Skylines* is at the forefront of the project.

By simulating real-life environments and scenarios in-game, Paradox and Colossal Order's city-builder is being used by real-world city planners to explore ways to support the needs of the new district's residents. "Norra Djurgårdstaden is seeking new ways of engaging people that are normally not involved in the discussions of the future of our city, and how to plan for its desired direction," says project director Staffan Lorentz. "Games can be an entry port for a new group having a real say and having new ways of looking at things."

That's where *Cities: Skylines* comes in. By way of three weekend-long workshops, Stockholm city officials have joined Swedish Building Service representatives,

Paradox and Colossal Order developers, and members of the public to discuss how the proposed district will look and function once development is complete. Special considerations such as environmental schemes to reduce fossil fuel consumption and the installation of surplus cycle lanes and public transport routes have been flagged as top priority, thus these scenarios have been applied and tested in-game to see how they might play out in reality.

IN-GAME SHOWCASE

As such, the district in its entirety has been mapped out both via a scaled physical model and within *Cities: Skylines*—with city planners applying and reapplying digital iterations of the area following visits to and from the real-world building site itself. Without prior training, technical blueprints mean very little to the average citizen. Therefore the point of the coinciding workshops is to showcase the scheme in earnest—fully realized in three dimensions against relatable surroundings—which in turn serves to help the learning process.

"I think the most exciting part about all of this is that it isn't just a PR stunt," says Paradox's COO Susana Meza. "Actually, people are genuinely wanting to solve some of the problems and issues that might arise when city planning in this day and age, but also innovate



Players of *Cities: Skylines* are also involved.



Build it and they will come

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS



1 CITY PLANNING

Besides being reimaged in *Cities: Skylines*, the Norra Djurgårdstaden district has been built in a scale model, within which plans are first plotted out.



2 WORKSHOP GATHERING

Two of the proposed three workshops have now taken place where attendees were given a crash course in how *Cities: Skylines* works, before sharing ideas in-game.



3 SITE PREPARATION

City planners and students visit the building site before reporting back with considerations for Norra Djurgårdstaden as it appears within *Cities: Skylines*.



4 VIRTUAL RECREATION

Norra Djurgårdstaden is recreated to scale in *Cities: Skylines*, including traffic systems, and residential and commercial zones relevant to the area.

around it. The fact they have the people who're are actually making the decisions, sitting on the budget, involved in this and using a new medium I think is extremely cool—but also brave.”

Using games as a public consultation tool is something the Swedish Building Service is already familiar with, having collaborated with Mojang and the United Nations in 2012. Named Block By Block, this project was a similar city-building scheme that used *Minecraft* to encourage fresh perspectives and helped citizens have a say in the reconstruction process of their own neighborhoods. The Norra Djurgårdstaden project, on the other hand, operates on a larger scale and therefore marks a more sophisticated collaboration between city development and videogames.

FUTURE POTENTIAL

Yet *Cities: Skylines* in its vanilla state isn't without its limitations, and to this end renowned *Cities* modder Alexander Oberroither was flown in from Austria to attend the last workshop. Here, he explained how the game might better portray reality with the use of additional user-made mods beyond the base game. “I see potential in *Cities: Skylines* being used for a lot of different things in real life, and this workshop fulfilled its purpose in allowing us to find out which direction the project is going,” says Oberroither. “I really enjoyed my three days [taking part]. I learned a lot and I hope that I can make

use of it when I start studying spatial planning at the university in October.”

In light of the most recent workshop, the Swedish Building Service plans to review its findings and decide how *Cities: Skylines* can best be used in pushing the project forward. When the time comes, no matter how close the game's interpretation is to the project's final incarnation, the ways in which *Cities: Skylines* has been used to help visualize proposals, discuss city functions, and, ultimately, design buildings is quite remarkable and is something which could pave the way for similar ventures down the line.

“I think that today most people have an association with games, be that yourself or your kids playing with them, most people are exposed to games in one way or another,” adds Meza. “As such, it's a super powerful medium to do something more beyond providing entertainment. I think we've just scraped the

surface. Games are something everyone is talking about now—we have every possibility to make an impact.”

In the case of Norra Djurgårdstaden, its residents are the ones who'll be impacted the most. “Engaging citizens is part of the future,” says Norra Djurgårdstaden local Ann Edberg. “It's fantastic to be able to participate in the creation of a new part of Stockholm during its development process, rather than just experience it once it's done.” ■

Joe Donnelly

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

November 15

DEVELOPER

Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER

Ubisoft

LINK

www.watchdogs2.com

WATCH DOGS 2

Hands-on with another stylish but unconvincing hacktivist yarn

Watch Dogs 2 is about Sticking it to the Man in the same way that ordering salad in a burger joint is about bringing down the entire fast food industry. It's about being an online freedom fighter, waging war on the power-brokers of cyberspace, in the same way that owning a Che Guevara poster makes you a fully paid-up communist.

It's also a joyfully barmy open-world affair in which you can get yourself murdered by blowing kisses at gangsters, and a sleek stealth-action sandbox in which you can dismantle an entire factory complex using nothing but gas pipelines and an RC car.

To play *Watch Dogs 2* is to alternate between giddy enjoyment and a sense of overwhelming superficiality. When I hack the ignition on a yacht through the eyes of my quadrotor drone, smashing the boat against a jetty to the surprise of guards who I then bombard with shock grenades as they move to investigate, I want to buy the designers a drink. But when I hear my character's DedSec chums rant about conformity and consumerism while sipping take-out coffees and brandishing phones full of licensed music, I want to reach through the screen and give everybody a clip round the ear. The game is a hoot under the thumb, but its hacktivist premise rings incredibly hollow.

Thematic inconsistencies of this sort are nothing new, but there's something especially grating about a tale of battling Big Data told through a game with a raft of persistent online features, a story about political and artistic transgression which leverages open-world design principles as old and fusty as *Assassin's Creed*.

Set in San Francisco, it takes the disconnect a little further than its Chicago-based predecessor. Progress through the story of wrongfully incriminated coder

Marcus Holloway and the DedSec hacker collective is determined by your in-game social media follower count, Ubisoft's latest analogy for XP, with new missions unlocking once you hit certain milestones. That's right—the real mark of an eRebel is the #clout you have on Twitter.

If the story feels like your dad trying to pass himself off as an underground skater, individual chapters and scenarios may yet intrigue. According to creative director Jonathan Morin, each of the main missions is a study of a particular facet of our present-day digital dystopia. There's a mission where you have to break into a luxurious "Smart Home", for example, bypassing surveillance systems and chubby robot sentries in search of dirt on Haum Electronics, a company selling personal data to advertisers on the sly.

"It's letting the player kind of connect the dots to an extent," Morin explained. "Making them reflect about the subject matter, without offering some kind of shallow conclusion in one narrow story. We're focusing on the story of DedSec's fight against the Blume corporation, and as you're doing that you're getting a lot of little tidbits on the different dimensions of our technology today."

EVIL CORP

This doesn't really address the game's basic double standard—any sim in which you can profit from the very infrastructure you're at war with, stealing cash from bystanders using your phone's profiler app, has no real business styling itself as an underdog's story. But there's the opportunity, at least, for some crafty potted social commentary as you gradually bring Blume to its knees. The choice of an African-American lead may also have important repercussions—it's a chance to think about the evolution of racial profiling in the age of algorithms that make snap judgements about users based on your bio. I've seen little so far, however, to indicate that Marcus's race really has a bearing on the world or plot.

PLAYED IT

IT FEELS LIKE YOUR DAD TRYING TO PASS HIMSELF OFF AS AN UNDERGROUND SKATER

Watch Dogs 2

➤ Morin adds that being a hacker is less about smashing firewalls or toppling oligarchies as it is revelling in the full capabilities of the systems you're given, for all the efforts of their manufacturers to restrict their usage. It's not about destroying the iPhone, in other words, but realizing the device's true potential. The devs have made this ethic the heart of an open-world sandbox in which you can strain the rules to a ridiculous extent, once you've unlocked the requisite abilities.

You might, for instance, rewrite a guard's criminal record in order to get him arrested, then follow up by "outing" one of the other guards as a snitch, drawing the wrath of local gangs and triggering a diversionary gun battle. You can hack every car in the vicinity at once so that they careen into each other, trapping pursuers in gridlock as you flee the area.

"We're literally letting the player break the level design to win, which we thought was the best mechanical way to express what a hacker is," Morin says. "A hacker isn't just breaking into computer systems, a hacker is somebody who will look at a problem in an unorthodox way. He's not limited by how the system is designed to work, and he's not limited by how a society is supposed to function, and this state of mind is there in the game. You can finish a mission without even entering the building. You can go in as a ghost, hopping from one CCTV camera to another."

Watch Dogs 2's San Francisco is just as fun to meddle with as the restricted areas that house your story objectives. The side activities aren't all that novel—race missions for cars or drones and collectible research points for your skill tree—but the urban simulation is pleasantly lively and responsive, even when compared to *GTA V*.

While strolling through a suburb, I came across a man using a crowbar to break into an SUV. A swift chop to the back of the neck and the vehicle was mine, leaving the would-be robber to be scooped up by an ambulance. Later I intervened in a lover's street quarrel before it turned violent, persuading the husband to back off using the game's new emote wheel. Emotes are a throwaway but entertaining addition—they affect NPCs at



IT'S NOT ABOUT DESTROYING THE IPHONE, IN OTHER WORDS, BUT REALIZING ITS POTENTIAL

unpredictable distances, and reactions will vary wildly. At one point I tried flirting with a bouncer and was jabbed with a taser for my pains.

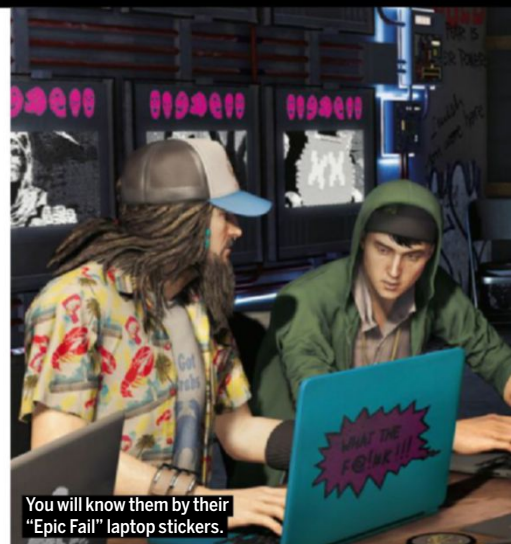
The game's story scenarios follow a familiar pattern: you drive to a restricted zone, find your way to its core via any combination of force and subtlety, then escape before the hammer comes down. Ubisoft is a dab hand at this kind of setup, and the three infiltration sections I had a go at were a good blend of challenge and volatility. In one, I flew a drone around the outside of a tower, disabling circuit breakers in sequence so that I could seize control of the CCTV cameras within. Then I had to loiter in the area waiting for a download to complete while guards searched for the source of the hack. In another, I had to retrieve a vanload of goods behind a security gate, using my RC car and drone to scope out guard patterns, rig traps (you can turn circuit boxes into proximity mines, then lure NPCs toward them) and plot a route. I was rumbled, but managed to scrape through the mission after raising a motorized platform to serve as a sniping point and setting the Mafia on one of my assailants.

BEST IN SHOW

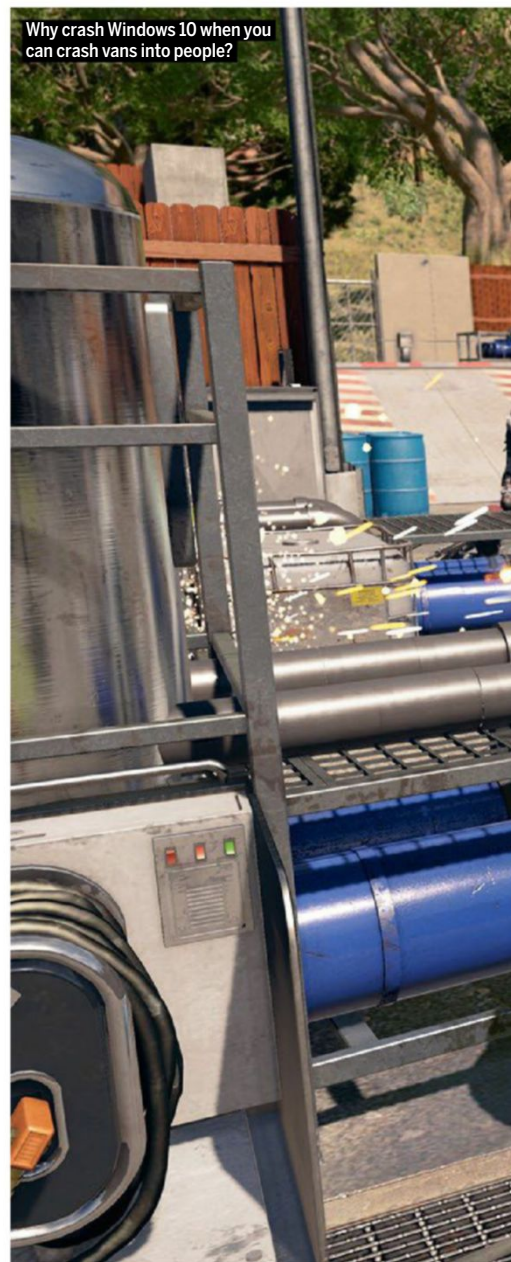
The energy system that fuels your acts of cyberterrorism is generous—you can refill the bar by picking highlighted options when you hack certain devices—and the third-person controls and context-sensitive animations are as swish as you'd expect from the creators of *Ezio Auditeo*. The car handling feels subtler and more predictable in this iteration, too, thanks to the input of *Driver: San Francisco* studio Ubisoft Reflections. It's a confident advance on the first game, though more an exercise in rearranging and polishing than a new experience.

If only the accompanying story was as consistent and credible. While as slick as any of its Ubisoft Montreal stablemates, *Watch Dogs 2* seems set to join a long line of major releases that crave the topicality of a fight-the-power tale, but are unwilling to address the implications such a stance may have for their structure and design. As always you can disregard the writing, treating the game as a mass of variables with some inconvenient cinematic filler, but that's a compromise I'm really beginning to tire of. Ubisoft Montreal excels at crafting beautiful, cohesive environments. Now it needs to be braver with the narratives they contain.

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

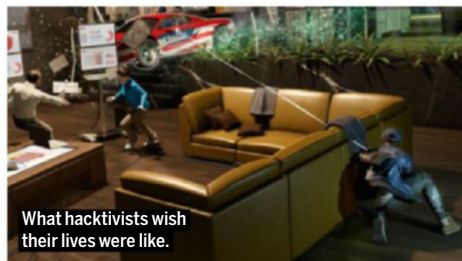


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San Fran looks amazing.



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Player2

Sea of Thieves

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2017DEVELOPER
RarePUBLISHER
MicrosoftLINK
www.seaofthieves.com

SEA OF THIEVES

Co-op pirate hijinks
on cartoon seas

I never thought the thing I would be most excited about regarding Microsoft's return to PC would be a co-op pirate game, but here we are. *Sea of Thieves* is a riot to demo, where four players jump onto a ship and head out to sea to duel with other craft. One player steers, one navigates and the others man the sails or guns. That's the theory, anyway: you can just as easily find yourself playing *Ride of the Valkyries* on the accordion and getting drunk, rather than contributing in any meaningful way. I've been waiting my whole life to do that.

Sea of Thieves is a product of the venerable Rare, which hasn't made a game I've really enjoyed since the early days of the Xbox 360 and titles like *Banjo Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts*, and *Viva Pinata* (that last one came to PC, although sadly it's not available on Steam). *Sea of Thieves* is built on a very simple idea and is immediately fun to play. If your ship takes damage, it starts to leak, and you can fix it up by boarding up holes in the hull. Firing cannons is simple, but requires good timing and coordination. Steep waves require steady steering. If you ever wanted your friends to become your crew in the excellent *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, the rhythm of combat and movement around the sea is similar, except you're playing against other human beings manning their own ships rather than AI.

Even if you're not being that useful in the battle, you can have a good time. The main similarities with earlier Rare games

PLAYED
IT

are the chunky art style and sense of humor. It feels very light right now in terms of actual stuff to do, and there's not a lot to what I played beyond this simple combat system. In theory, though, with the right amount of interaction, it could be great fun traveling around this world with three other friends. Rare is going to figure out what the game is as it goes, in a kind of Early Access-ish way. The developer describes it as an "evolving" experience where new ways to play will be dropped in after its initial release.

Some things have been settled on, however: there will be mystical sea creatures lurking under the surface; you'll be able to take on quests, and explore islands, looking for loot, while other players will be out there in the game doing the same thing; and every player gets their own ship to control, so you're not always sharing, and you'll be able to upgrade to better hulls and cannons over the course of playing. How it's all going to weave together structurally is a bit of a mystery, but it could add up to a fairly complete pirate-'em-up, and there aren't really enough good games about this particular subject around. Sounds like the end result will be a light action RPG.

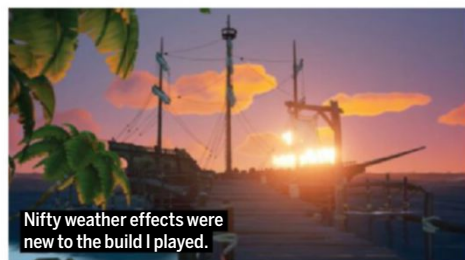
PORT AUTHORITY

There's a lot already planned on top of what I've played, but this demo suggests there's probably a lot of potential in a Quick Play multiplayer option for people who want a big pirate fight on a whim, too. This demo only took about ten minutes to finish and it was the best thing I played at a mostly disappointing Gamescom, other than maybe *Gwent*.

The team is conscious of pleasing a PC audience, too—Rare asked me what I think a PC player would like out of *Sea of Thieves*' port and, of course, the first thing I said was a FoV slider. I was half joking, but the fact Rare asked for my thoughts is encouraging (it was already aware that people want that in their graphics options). I'm keen to see how *Sea of Thieves* evolves from this exciting short burst of fun into something bigger. At the very least, like *Forza Horizon 3*, it's a game we never would've seen on PC had Microsoft not decided to give Windows games another shot.

Samuel Roberts

Every good ship
needs... a study?



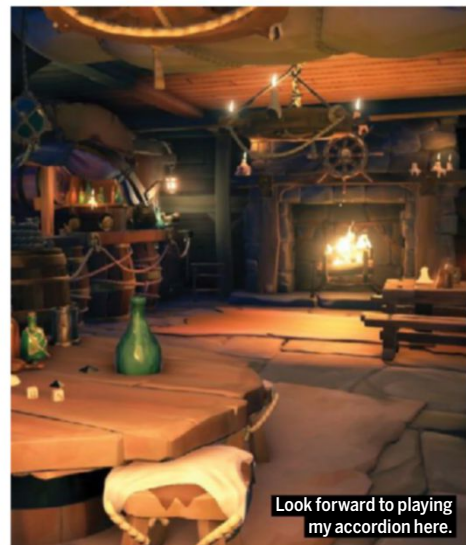
Nifty weather effects were
new to the build I played.



**FIRING CANNONS IS SIMPLE,
BUT REQUIRES GOOD TIMING
AND COORDINATION**



The demo didn't have us exploring islands.



Look forward to playing my accordion here.

Tilo is a charming little chap.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2017

DEVELOPER
SeithCG

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.ghostofatale.com

GHOST OF A TALE

A mousey stealth adventure in a gorgeous fantasy setting

There is nothing that's further removed from techy stealth-'em-ups than playing a mouse in a medieval fantasy setting, but that's *Ghost of a Tale*. Largely the work of one man and a handful of his friends, this stealth exploration game, still in Early Access, is as bewitching as it is undemanding.

PLAYED
IT

You play a mouse minstrel called Tilo, who, looking as though he was plucked straight from the pages of a Brian Jacques novel, has been imprisoned for acts of sedition. With your wife missing and only a key and a note left in your cell by a mysterious stranger, you're thrown into the action, slinking through passages, avoiding guards, and searching for clues as to your wife's whereabouts.

Although there are a few dabs of light puzzling, the game is largely about exploration and discovery, which is great when it looks as gorgeous as this. From the detailed textures and locations to the



lighting and cutesy-yet-naturalistic character animations, the game weaves an enchanting atmosphere. The real star, though, is Tilo. Watching him scratch or gaze around as you stand idle, or scamper on all fours, kicking up dust, is impressive.

While *Ghost of a Tale* could be charged with being too easy, its genteel pace is far from being a sin. But that's not to say there aren't issues. The stealth elements can at times fracture believability, leading to frustration. Leaving the jail, I find myself venturing into the courtyard in pitch darkness, but somehow manage to be spotted by a patrolling rat on the far side of the area. And yet, when I huddled in panic at the side of a corridor barely 15 minutes previously, a guard brushed past me without incident.

THE STEALTH ELEMENTS CAN AT TIMES FRACTURE BELIEVABILITY

Couple this with nuisance backtracking and how easy it is to miss important items, such as keys, it's often simpler to forget stealth and just run. Legging it past numerous guards is likely not what I'm supposed to do, but as I scuttle around tables and up staircases with a comet trail of foes huffing after me, it's quicker and easier. Especially when I've circled locations endlessly for specific items.

MORE TO COME

It's also something of a let-down that the RPG mechanics, such as the surprisingly big inventory system, feel somewhat underutilized. When I first opened it up and saw tabs aplenty for food, clothing, and tools, I expected a little more. However, the developer says the game at present only reflects a quarter of the final content, so hopefully further quests and locations will make up for the current disappointments and frustrations.

Ghost of a Tale otherwise feels absorbing and will hopefully shape up to be a heart-warming gem worth \$20 of any hard-hearted bastard's money.

Lorna Reid



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Worlds Adrift

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC 2016

DEVELOPER
Bossa Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.worldsadrift.com

WORLDS ADRIFT

Build an airship and explore a strange, broken world

A world has shattered, leaving thousands of broken chunks of land floating in a vast sky. This is the evocative setting for *Worlds Adrift*, an ambitious, beautiful, and enormous multiplayer sandbox being developed by Bossa Studios (*Surgeon Simulator*, *I Am Bread*). You'll harvest materials, build an airship, then fly freely between these islands. And on them you'll find ancient ruins to explore, technology to scavenge, and other players to encounter, not all of who will be friendly.

Looming ominously in this endless sky is a storm wall. A vast monolith of dark clouds, lightning and raging wind. And the developers overseeing my hands-on suggest I try flying through it on an airship they've built for me. The ship looks like an old pirate galleon, but floating in the air thanks to some anti-gravity device stuck to it. On the exposed deck there's a wheel to control it, a few cannons and some gauges—including an artificial horizon—to help me navigate when I can't see, which is likely in the thick of a storm.

However, things get off to a bad start when I somehow manage to snag the ship on a tree as we're taking off and flip it upside down, destroying it. Everything in *Worlds Adrift* is governed by physics, so if you crash your ship, it'll smash to pieces. Luckily the developers are able to conjure up a new one with a debug menu. But before we set off, there's one more obstacle to contend with. We're attacked by a giant, strangely beautiful, flying

PLAYED
IT

manta ray. We man the cannons on the deck and fire at it until it flops dead on the ground, then we begin our journey into the intimidating storm beyond.

There are three of us on the ship. I'm at the helm and the others are on the deck manning the cannons. Those manta rays, and other creatures, can attack you in the storm too. I steer the ship towards the wall and slowly the blue sky is replaced by a deep, gray void. With zero visibility I have to use the artificial horizon and compass to make sure I'm keeping a steady bearing. But the violent winds battering and jerking the ship around make this difficult. I have to wrestle against the wind to keep it straight as my crew fire the cannons at pursuing manta rays. It's a hell of an introduction to the game.

And, of course, it all goes wrong. I'm staring at the gauges when I see one of the cannons fly past me and knock them clean off. They twirl into the storm, never to be seen again, and suddenly I'm blind. Bolts of lightning strike the ship, tearing it to pieces. My crewmates are gone. Then the ship turns upside down and I fall off, watching the wreck get smaller as I plummet into the depths of the storm. I can respawn at the nearest island easily, but my ship is done for, and my attempt to get through the storm wall is well and truly over.

STORM WARNING

Another player might come through this part of the storm later and, if they do, they'll see the remains of my ship spinning hopelessly in the maelstrom. The game remembers everything its players do, and that information is stored on the server. So if you see a crashed ship, you'll know it once belonged to another player, and it'll tell you a story. That's the most exciting thing about *Worlds Adrift* to me. A world filled with stories, all created by players, all sharing the same space.

When the game is released I'll be tackling that storm again, but this time with a sturdier ship. Bossa wants *Worlds Adrift* to be an MMO where player skill and creativity are king, rather than high-level players being separated by low-level ones just by how many tedious quests they've grinded. Anyone can get through that storm. It'll just take some ingenuity.

Andy Kelly

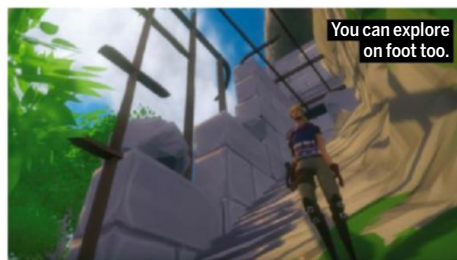
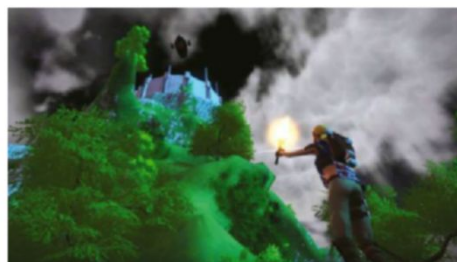
Team up with other players to defend your airship.



Your ship can be any shape you want.

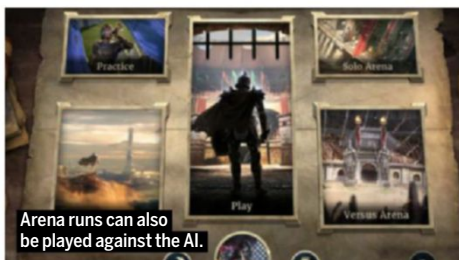


I MANAGE TO SNAG THE SHIP ON A TREE AND FLIP IT UPSIDE DOWN, DESTROYING IT

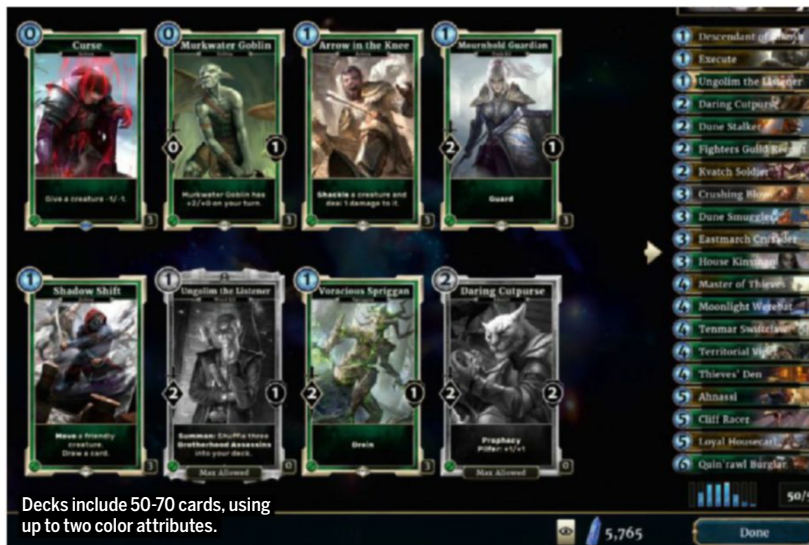
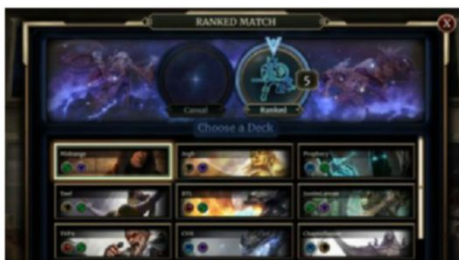


PREVIEW

Bethesda is taking aim at
Blizzard's *Hearthstone*.



Arena runs can also
be played against the AI.



Decks include 50-70 cards, using
up to two color attributes.

The Elder Scrolls: Legends

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Late 2016

DEVELOPER
Dire Wolf Digital

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
<https://legends.bethesda.net>

THE ELDER SCROLLS: LEGENDS

Can this more serious card-slinger take on Blizzard's RNG circus?

By rights, *The Elder Scrolls: Legends* has no business in the preview section. Though still technically in open beta, it's feature-complete, recently had a welcome UI polish, and you can spend money on the cards without fear of your collection being wiped. Bethesda's Pete Hines told us it's only the absence of the phone and tablet versions that's preventing the switch being flipped to full release.

As a digital CCG in which you trade blows with spells and creatures, it's impossible to view *Legends* outside the prism of *Hearthstone*. In terms of complexity, *Legends* sits somewhere between *Hearthstone* and *Magic: The Gathering*, so its best chance is going to be luring fans who've become disgruntled with how monotonous playing the most powerful creature on curve has become in *Hearthstone*. So much so that Blizzard recently took the rare step of nerfing a bunch of cards in a bid to calm the growing disquiet at the game's state.

Against that backdrop, *Legends* has several potential advantages. The most important is the lane system, which enables you to plunk minions on the left or right of the board, with the proviso that (with a few exceptions) they can only attack enemies in the same lane. The impact is that you either have to commit to controlling both lanes, or more likely end up racing your opponent by focusing your resources on one side. Complicating

matters further, a unit dropped in the right lane will have the "cover" effect for one turn, meaning it can't be attacked by enemy creatures, but crucially can be targeted with actions, which are *Legends'* equivalent of spells. The potential for strategy versus *Hearthstone's* vanilla board should be obvious.

Another substantial system that differentiates *Legends* is its use of Runes and Prophecy cards. You begin the game with 30 HP and for each five you lose a Rune will break, drawing you a card in the process. If that card happens to have the Prophecy keyword on it, you can play it immediately and for free, potentially interrupting your opponent's turn. The good news here, especially for players sick of *Hearthstone's* aggressive meta, is the card draw from Runes and the explosive intervention of Prophecy cards make for a potentially powerful comeback mech if your opponent is just going ham.

PERFECTLY RANDOM

There's a caveat here, though. Plenty of *Legends* players are keen to argue that the game is less RNG-reliant than

Hearthstone. But it's still a card game, so luck will always play a substantial part. Also, in cards like Brutal Ashlander and Wabbajack, *Legends* still has high-impact

randomness, but crucially the game's other systems have prevented these cards from becoming in any way oppressive. That said, don't kid yourself that it isn't important to get off to a good start—tempo is still vital in *Legends*.

For the past two months I've hit the Legendary rank, which took around 100 games compared to the 500 or so needed to grind to *Hearthstone's* top tier. That's thanks largely to the *Legends* ladder, which has a safety net that prevents you dropping out of your current rank.

My one concern is the game doesn't seem to have caught the imagination yet, perhaps not helped by the lack of graphical pizzazz. The lapsed *Hearthstone* players who try *Legends* generally love it, but with no heavy marketing push to speak of yet, the player base still seems a little thin. Hopefully the mobile release will fix that, as well as positive word of mouth from existing players.

Tim Clark

PLAYED IT

MY ONE CONCERN IS THE GAME DOESN'T SEEM TO HAVE CAUGHT THE IMAGINATION YET



Dishonored 2



By Andy Kelly

LIKE CLOCKWORK

Supernatural assassin
Emily Kaldwin goes up
against an evil genius
and an army of
mechanical soldiers
in **DISHONORED 2**.

M

y target in The Clockwork Mansion, an early *Dishonored 2* mission, is the brilliant, evil Kirin Jindosh, Grand Inventor to the Duke and creator of the terrifying Clockwork Soldiers. These mechanical killing machines are agile,

armored, and merciless, and Jindosh is building an army of them. He has to be dealt with, but he knows I'm coming for him. He waits patiently for me in a grand house of his own design—the beautiful but deadly Clockwork Mansion. ✖

Dishonored 2

✧ I've chosen to tackle this mission as Emily Kaldwin, a new playable character in *Dishonored 2*. She's been marked by the Outsider and granted supernatural powers, some of which are similar to the ones her father Corvo Attano used in the first game, and others that are wildly different.

She finds the mansion apparently deserted. I'm immediately struck by how richly detailed the environmental design is. I can see glass cases containing bizarre clockwork contraptions, a colossal stone sculpture of a Lovecraftian sea monster, and a variety of paintings of sullen-looking aristocrats and jungle landscapes. The first game was gorgeous enough, but Arkane's artists have taken their craft to the next level in the sequel.

The calm doesn't last. I enter a room with a large staircase and suddenly I'm faced with a Clockwork Soldier. They're tall, intimidating things, but strangely slender and elegant. The enormous, razor-sharp blades it has for arms glint menacingly, but it doesn't attack. Jindosh's voice crackles over a speaker, introducing me to his creation, full of pride. It seems he couldn't resist showing it off before activating it. But as he marvels at his invention, I notice a small control box. I use a rewire tool on it, and at once the robot is on my side. It stomps off down a corridor and



I watch it kill two guards, then get destroyed by one of its metal brothers.

I return to the previous room, but a locked door blocks my path towards Jindosh's lab. Then I notice a device called a configuration lever. I yank this lever down and suddenly parts of the room start to slide away, rise into the ceiling, and sink into the floor. The layout of the room is changing around me, shifting and mutating, and it's an amazing sight. I stare in awe at the intricacy of the mechanisms as the room morphs into an entirely different one. Emily is stunned by what Jindosh

has built, and I'm stunned by what the developer has. I feel like we're sharing a moment. But even after this transformation, there's still no way to progress. A Wall of Light—an energy field that kills anyone who tries to walk through it—is blocking my way.

WHALE OF A TIME

Then I have an idea. I pull the configuration lever again, and as the room is changing I slip through a gap in the mechanism to a chamber below. And there I find a whale oil generator powering the Wall of Light. Jindosh

POWER TRIP

Emily's powers, courtesy of the Outsider



DOPPELGÄNGER

Summons a double of Emily that attracts enemies. If they destroy it they'll assume the threat is over and transition to a less alert state.



DOMINO

Links human targets so they die or fall unconscious together. Link four enemies, shoot one with a sleep dart, and they'll all fall asleep.



DARK VISION

See better in dark places and track enemies through walls. Activating it also reveals which direction they're looking and how far they can see.



SHADOW WALK

Emily assumes a fast-moving shadow form, reducing her visibility. From this you can perform a lethal or non-lethal stealth attack.



MESMERIZE

Summon a spirit to enthrall humans or hounds. They stare into the Void, mesmerized, letting you slip past or attack without alerting them.



FAR REACH

Emily's version of Blink, allowing her to pull herself rapidly across a distance. Upgrade it to pull enemies and objects towards you.

THE LAYOUT OF THE ROOM CHANGES AROUND ME

congratulates me over the speaker, but I sense some frustration in his voice. It's a cleverly constructed environmental puzzle, and the Clockwork Mansion is full of them. I'll leave the rest for you to discover yourself, but I can tell you the room transformations are used in some interesting ways. I'm closer to reaching the lab, but I have another objective to complete before I go there. Anton Sokolov, a returning character from *Dishonored* and Jindosh's former mentor, is being held captive somewhere, and I have to rescue him.

I won't say exactly how I rescue Sokolov, because I don't want to spoil that part of the level for you either, but suffice to say my method involves a chamber built to test the Clockwork

Meagan Foster, a new ally played by actor Rosario Dawson.



MIND GAMES
Genius inventor Kirin Jindosh was once a pupil of Anton Sokolov, but feels he has outgrown and surpassed his old mentor. He's your target, and there are several ways to deal with him.

Soldiers, and using Emily's Far Reach power. This is a slightly different take on Corvo's Blink that pulls her towards something rapidly rather than teleporting her there instantly. All the while Jindosh's voice goads and taunts me over the speaker, and occasionally comments on things outside of his regular scripted dialogue. My health is low at one point and he mentions my "ragged breath" and questions whether I have what it takes to beat him. When I destroy a Clockwork Soldier he's furious, but also curious as to how I did it. Touches like this make the level feel wonderfully reactive.

I take Sokolov back to the train carriage I arrived in, but I have to deal

with a couple of Clockwork Soldiers first. This time, instead of hacking them, I shoot their heads off with my pistol. This blinds them, but they can still hear, so I crouch and sneak past. Brilliantly, if an enemy wanders through here, the headless robots will think it's me and attack them. There are so many layers to the game's simulation, and they make *Dishonored 2* an even more powerful story generator than the original. With Sokolov secured it's finally time to locate Jindosh and end his villainy once and for all.

There are documents and audio recordings scattered around the Clockwork Mansion, and through them I learn a lot about Jindosh, his

NPC faces are beautifully stylized.



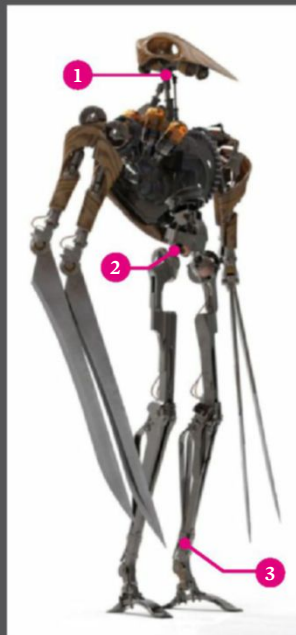


HEROIC EFFORT

Emily is the daughter of Corvo Attano and former Empress Jessamine Kaldwin, and a new playable character.

METAL GEARS

How to deal with a Clockwork Soldier



1 BLIND IT

Shoot its head off with the pistol to blind it. It can still hear, but if it hears an enemy's footsteps it'll attack them thinking it's you.

2 HACK IT

Sneak up and use a rewire tool to hack its control panel. It'll become your ally and attack any enemy it sees, including other soldiers.

3 BREAK IT

Stealth attack a soldier and Emily will break its legs with her sword before driving the blade into its gears to destroy it.

» inventions, and what makes him tick. I read a file that describes a so-called electroshock machine, which strips a person of their personality without impeding any special abilities they had. This triggers an optional objective that will allow me to deal with the inventor in a non-lethal, and slightly ironic, fashion. A *Dishonored* tradition I'm glad to see returning. If I can knock Jindosh out and plug him into his own dastardly device, it'll be just as devastating (and maybe even worse) than killing him. His brilliant intellect will be still there, locked away in his brain, but he won't be able to use it.

POETIC JUSTICE

I make my way deeper into the mansion, pulling more configuration levers, dealing with more guards and Clockwork Soldiers, and eventually I arrive in the lab. It's a massive circular room littered with strange devices and

A CRUEL FATE, BUT HEY, THAT'S DISHONORED FOR YOU

half-built robots. I'm sure I could have sneaked in here without being seen, but in this playthrough I brazenly walk through the main doors. The inventor welcomes me to his lab and sends a couple of his machines to kill me. I use my sword and explosive pistol rounds to deal with them, then it's just me and Jindosh. As he fires at me with a gun I use Far Reach to climb the balcony he's hiding on and knock him out with a sleep dart. I could have killed him, but I've decided to imprison him in his own disturbed mind instead.

Far Reach isn't quite as fast as Blink.



Sokolov has been captured by Jindosh.

The lab is another example of Arkane's remarkable world-building. By interacting with a control console I can make parts of the lab fold and slide away as the gears in an enormous, ornate clock embedded in the floor churn and interlock. This is the basis for another environmental puzzle, which has to be completed to allow you to use the electroshock machine.

I dump Jindosh's snoozing body in the chair, solve the puzzle, then throw the switch. He jerks and spasms and gurgles, then slumps limply in his seat, gibbering to himself incoherently. A cruel fate, but hey, that's *Dishonored* for you. And so my mission is complete. There will be no army of Clockwork Soldiers to trouble the empire, and Sokolov has been rescued from the clutches of his deranged former pupil.

Dishonored 2 is a big step up from the first game in terms of art, world-building, complexity, reactivity, and



The Outsider is now played by Gotham's Robin Lord Taylor.

intricacy. And considering the original already excelled at those things, that's pretty exciting. And although the visual design has the same distinctive style as before, the change from rat-infested, London-inspired Dunwall to the new setting of Karnaca gives the game a very different feel. Influenced by the climate, geography, and architecture of places like Greece, Spain, Cuba, and Italy, it's a dramatic change of scenery.

The mansion is surrounded by a thick jungle canopy and I can hear strange bird calls in the distance, which makes the cobbled streets of Dunwall feel miles away. But this new place does have an infestation of its own: parasitic bloodflies rather than rats.

Arkane's craft and attention to detail is hugely impressive. The first *Dishonored* started as a bold new IP and became the best modern example of the immersive sim genre on PC—a title its sequel may well inherit. ■

Uninvited GUEST

The making of **LADY BOYLE'S LAST PARTY**, our favorite *Dishonored* mission.



By Andy Kelly



ask any *Dishonored* fan what their favorite mission is and there's a good chance they'll say Lady Boyle's Last Party. Your target

is Lady Boyle herself, the setting a lavish masked ball in her opulent mansion, and there are countless ways to complete your objective. It's an amazingly complex level, both in terms of its layout and the intricacies of the mission itself. My first question for Harvey Smith, co-creative director, is a simple one: where on Earth did they start?



“We had a whiteboard of interesting setups for missions,” he says. “Things like there being three targets, but only one of them is the correct target. Then in another column we had a long list of locations including a costume party, which of course became the setting for Lady Boyle’s Last Party. We were basically mixing and matching ideas. Some were thrown out straight away, though, like a mission where a train stops and you have five minutes to kill a passenger before it leaves the station.”

One of the most interesting things about the level is the stark contrast between the starting area and the mansion you end up at. Corvo’s first objective is to find a way into the party, and to do so he has to make his way through a region of moonlit, plague-ridden city streets.

“One thing that makes the level work is the chunk of urban architecture beforehand,” says Smith. “You’re roaming this apocalyptic city and avoiding guards, then suddenly you’re in a place with masked aristocrats where you can move around freely.”

One of *Dishonored*’s major themes is the abuse of power. “That can be a guard punching a dude in the mouth just because he can get away with it,” says Smith, “or it can be a mythic figure offering you supernatural powers with the cynical expectation that you’re

going to abuse them. It’s about one person living a wealthy life while a thousand others are living like rats.”

In Lady Boyle’s Last Party, the sharp divide between the grim surrounding streets and the grand house, hidden safely away from the infected citizens and rats, reflects this theme. “You go through the streets, which are rat-infested and littered with diseased corpses, then you cross over into this palatial home where there are gold-plated frames and tables loaded with little crab cakes that someone has spent all day making.”

BEHIND THE MASK

The guests, whose faces are obscured by bizarre masks, represent the richest, most influential people in Dunwall. “We want to avoid ‘poor people are good and rich people are evil’, but it’s true that power tends to make people grotesque, or it puts people in situations that are hard to resist,” says Smith. “Rich families profited from selling chemicals to the Nazis. People are making money from housing projects in Detroit. It’s a tone-deafness to human suffering in exchange for personal profit that some

of the upper class citizens in Dunwall are guilty of.”

The mansion itself is one of the best examples of *Dishonored*’s incredible art design and world-building. Like many locations in the game, it doesn’t feel like a level; it feels like a place. “One of the secrets to the worlds we build is that they’re messy,” says Smith. “There isn’t ‘the stealth corridor’ and ‘the hacking hallway’. Instead, we try to blend these things naturally into the environment. And it helps that European cities, which inspired Dunwall, are inherently

more organic than grid-like American ones. When they say ‘all the money is on the screen’ about a film, that’s true of Lady Boyle’s Last Party too. We put so much work into it.”

The masks worn

by the party guests are another example of Arkane’s sophisticated visual design. “I remember the meeting,” says Smith. “At first we were thinking about cats, jack-o’-lanterns, stuff like that. Traditional Halloween imagery. But then we ended up with the more surreal designs that ended up in the game, like a baby coming out of someone’s head and a fox with a corn cob pipe. When we combined these with the pseudo-Victorian aristocratic costumes, it really worked.”

As dark as *Dishonored* is, the game also has a sense of humor, including the ability to sign the guestbook at the party as yourself, despite potentially being the most wanted man in the city. “Our world is grim, terrible, and plague-infested, but what makes that work is having a little relief. Signing the book as Corvo Attano feels almost perverse. And it creates gossip later. ‘Is it possible he was actually there?’ ‘No, it’s someone’s idea of a joke.’ And players love that kind of humor in the middle of all this darkness.”

GUEST LIST *The people behind the party*



HARVEY SMITH
Co-creative director
Previous work: *Deus Ex*, *Thief*, *Deadly Shadows*



SÉBASTIEN MITTON
Art director
Previous work: *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*, *BioShock 2*



DAMIEN LAURENT
Lead architect
Previous work: *Splinter Cell*, *Double Agent*, *BioShock 2*



RAPHAËL COLANTONIO
Co-creative director
Previous work: *Arx Fatalis*, *Dark Messiah*



CHRISTOPHE CARRIER
Level design director
Previous work: *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*



LEFT: Fireworks draw your eye to this stunning ceiling.



**GROUNDS
FOR CONCERN**

There are several ways to slip into the mansion if you get creative with Corvo's powers.

**WATCH
DOGS**

The fact that guards won't bother you if you stay out of trouble gives the level a unique feel.





PARTY CRASHER

Three ways to infiltrate the party



BLINK

The easiest way to sneak into the party is to use Blink to jump over the wall from a rooftop. As soon as you set foot in the grounds, the guards will assume you're a guest.



INVITATION

A partygoer outside the mansion will drop their invitation, which you can use to waltz straight through the front door. You can also find one in the House of Pleasure mission.



FISH

Possess a fish in the street section and you can swim through the sewers until you emerge beneath the mansion. You can then make your way up to the party through the cellar.

LIGHT TOUCH

The lighting, and effects like the hazy smoke hanging in the air, create a rich atmosphere.

FOLLOWING ORDERS

The way the guards move around gives the level an almost *Hitman*-like feel in places.



One of the Boyle sisters. But is it the right one?

But while the non-lethal solutions in a lot of *Dishonored's* missions are darkly comical, the one here is just plain dark. "Regrettably dark," according to Smith. A partygoer called Lord Brisby, who has an unhealthy obsession with your target, asks you to "deliver" her to him, and in return he'll make sure she's never seen again. So while you aren't killing her, you are helping a possibly mentally disturbed man in a creepy scarecrow mask to spirit her away somewhere from which she'll never return. It's one of the most sinister examples of the game's characteristic moral grayness.

Lady Boyle's Last Party is also one of the finest examples of *Dishonored's* detailed simulation and open-ended design. The fact that you can move around as you please gives you more time to formulate a complicated plan, whether you're going for a high or low chaos approach. But you have to determine which of the three Boyle sisters is your target first. Because, brilliantly, every time you play the level your target is a different sister.

Reading their diaries will reveal something about their personalities, which is one method of discovering the correct target. Waverly, for example, is paranoid, and you can convince her that her life is in danger and lead her to the cellar to quietly deal with her. Esma, on the other hand, has an insatiable sexual appetite, and you can exploit this and have her lead you to her bedroom. And Lydia—the hardest to kill quietly—is a music lover, and will

retreat to the music room occasionally to play the piano. There are so many layers and so many possible routes and outcomes that it's no surprise that this mission has become a fan favorite.

IN CONTROL

"In our games we don't have those scenes where the player's in a helicopter and it crashes into a building and it collapses," says Smith. "We'd rather let you drive the action yourself. It's a different kind of drama, knowing that you did it, that you had an impact on the simulation. It's harder to sell, of course. The helicopter is a much easier, more immediate sell. But you walk away with a more unique experience."

The level is full of Easter eggs and reactivity that reinforces this idea of you having a direct impact on what's happening—some of which carries over from previous levels. If your chaos level is high, some of the guests will sneeze, implying the plague is spreading more rapidly. If you repeatedly bother a certain guest, he'll call the guards and you'll have to make an excuse. Make the wrong one and you'll be asked to leave the party. Eat the apple belonging to the guard at the gate and he'll exclaim "My apple! Just who do you think you are?" Small details, but they bring the level to life.

"WE'D RATHER LET YOU DRIVE THE ACTION YOURSELF"

I ask Smith if any ideas were scrapped before they made it into the final level. "All the major movements were there from the start. The exterior area, getting the invitation, and even subtle stuff like signing the guestbook. We did originally intend for more people you knew to be at the party, but we couldn't figure out how to keep them alive. Raphael [Colantonio] has all these funny sayings from his aunts and grandmother. He says that if an idea is cut early then we 'killed it in the egg', so anything that didn't make it into the mission was probably killed in the egg before we spent time on it."

Dishonored always struck me as a game with a very driven, singular vision, and this response seems to

confirm that. They had a strong concept, a costume party assassination with a mystery target, and ran with it, never losing sight of the original idea. The result is one of the most entertaining, deep, and complex levels in the history of the immersive sim.

It's the perfect expression of the genre, giving you a fun simulation to experiment with, a rich setting to exploit, and engaging tools to create unique stories with.

"*Dishonored* is about your own problem solving, plan formulation, and epiphanies," says Smith. "It's about the drama of your own experiences." ■



20

The

MOST SPECTACULAR

GAME WORLDS

Beautiful or desolate, intricate or vast,
these are the game worlds everyone
should explore.

By Samuel Roberts

THE WITCHER 3

1 Between the northern European landscapes of *Wild Hunt* and the Mediterranean charms of *Blood & Wine*, CD Projekt Red provides a gorgeous and complete representation of the *Witcher* universe. It's not just the bleakly beautiful vistas that make regions like the Skellige archipelago so extraordinary to explore, it's that the developers clearly thought about how genuine wild places feel when creating them. Also, Toussaint is the closest games have come to offering a fantasy holiday destination you'd actually want to visit.



ARMA 3

2 Bohemia is the king of beautiful and sprawling environments. The 270km² island of Altis in *Arma 3* is one hell of an achievement, and thanks to the heavy emphasis on simulation in the *Arma* games, it feels extremely realistic. I still count the day I spent wandering around there with the rest of the PCG team—while Andy Kelly played with the weather and mission conditions in *Arma 3*'s Zeus Mode—as one of the most thrilling I've had in an open world. In the *Apex* expansion, Tanoa offers an arguably more compelling jungle setting to enjoy.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

3 I love that *GTA V*'s Los Santos understands the appeal of Los Angeles as a vast urban sprawl, with both beautiful and rough areas. All my favorite places are represented in Rockstar's open-world crime capital, despite it being a fraction of the size of the real thing. And the way it captures the city's flat, pounding heat is a step beyond what we once expected from visual effects in games. This is better than the real world. At Christmas, Rockstar covers the city in snow in *GTA Online*. This year I've planned my holidays around it.



SLEEPING DOGS

4 A friend once told me the food in *Sleeping Dogs*' night market looked so good that it made him hungry in real life. He's not wrong. I frequently find myself with a strong hankering for a pork bun when I play this game. It may have been created in the spirit of the various trashy crime games that sprang up in the wake of *GTA III*, but its recreation of Hong Kong is remarkable. While Rockstar seems mainly interested in bringing American cities to life, *Sleeping Dogs* is a strong attempt at replicating another part of the world.



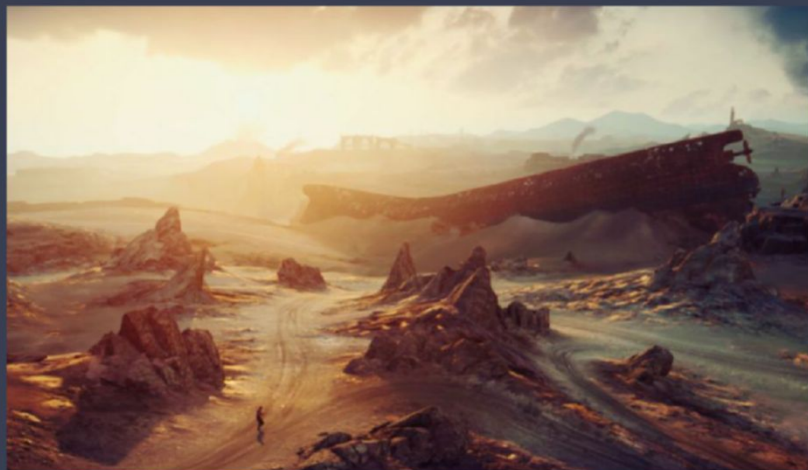
ARKHAM KNIGHT

5 Rocksteady went from creating an isolated but convincing setting in *Arkham Asylum* to a beautifully grim urban sprawl in *Arkham Knight*, decorated with a Blade Runner-ish mix of bright lights and endless rainfall. It's one of the best open-world settings around, even if the game's tiring use of the Batmobile muddies your perception of it a little bit. The stuttery PC port aside, everyone should glide over this gigantic version of Gotham at least once. It's just such a detailed representation of Batman and his fictional universe.



DISHONORED

6 The world of *Dishonored* is represented in the first game through a collection of hub-style urban environments packed with side stories and bits of lore to uncover. A mix of magic, Georgian imperialism and whale-oil powered steampunk, the rat-infested, historically familiar and not overly stylized city is a neat sidestep from *Thief*. The second game will build on those little impressions of a wider world that you glimpsed out of the corner of your eye while playing this one. Personally, I can't wait to see more of the place.



MAD MAX

7 It's no classic when it comes to combat or story, but Avalanche's *Mad Max* is just the ticket if you've seen *Fury Road* and ever fancied using the game's photo mode to mimic imagery from the movie. It's not all about brown, either. The game's vast, nearly *Just Cause*-sized setting has a surprising amount of color variation, as well as unexpected weather effects, which collectively create a decent facsimile of the post-apocalyptic wasteland the movies are famous for.



DARK SOULS III

8 While the first *Souls* game features some of the series' most memorable locations, the third game's haunting, gothic world has much more fidelity. From the faded grandeur of the colossal Lothric Castle to the haunting, wintry Irithyll of the Boreal Valley, it's one of From Software's greatest artistic achievements. And as well as looking pretty, the locations fill in the blanks left by the sparse, enigmatic story. Places like the Cemetery of Ash are full of subtle clues about the series' rich mythology.

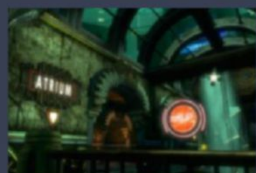
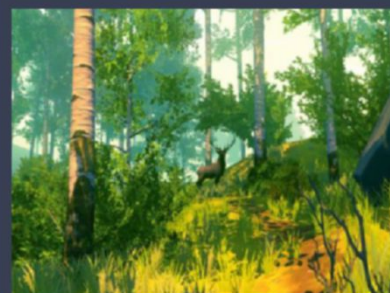
THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

9 If you're looking for an amazing fantasy world, *The Witcher 3* probably clinches it, but *Skyrim* offers a little more high fantasy without as much grime, and with more dragon fights. Its variety of tundra still impresses, and with mods like *Flora Overhaul* and *Realistic Water Two*, it can look as contemporary now as your PC is able to handle. Or, you can wait for the Bethesda devs to update it themselves next month.



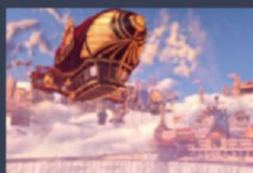
FIREWATCH

12 The Shoshone Forest of *Firewatch* was created from the stylish 2D art and direction of popular artist Olly Moss. And then, remarkably, it was built in 3D by just one person—environment artist Jane Ng. It feels sun-parched and wild—and rambling, despite the environment having been created mainly for the purposes of telling a linear story rather than exploration. This Wyoming wilderness is a place filled with secrets, where you will inevitably take lots of arty screenshots you'll then shamefully upload to Steam.



BIOSHOCK AND BIOSHOCK 2

10 Revisiting Rapture for this feature made me remember just how new and foreign it felt the first time I saw the storefronts in the Medical Pavilion, or a giant diving-suit man walking through a flooding atrium escorting a demonic-looking little girl. Rapture is so damn strange, in its mix of sci-fi otherworldliness and art deco. It's perhaps the strongest instance of fiction and setting working together on this list, an unforgettable journey under the sea.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

11 Play *BioShock* now and the size of its locations reflects the technical constraints of the time, however well the accomplished art direction covers it. Play *Infinite*, and it feels like the sky city of Columbia was created with unlimited resources and few restrictions. It's dreamlike, varied and gorgeous. It doesn't have to leave anything to the imagination—from the Hall of Heroes to the Shanty Town and Elizabeth's tower, it's a whole game of postcard-worthy sights, brought to life by a team of amazingly talented artists.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

13 Aside from Venice in *Assassin's Creed II*, *Black Flag's* setting is the only one I find exciting in Ubisoft's third-person murder universe. The art is always great in these places, they just don't feel handcrafted. That's not a problem when much of your game is set at sea, and you travel by ship between islands and other biomes, with the occasional settlement like Havana thrown in. *Black Flag* offers a sense of real exploration, inspired perhaps by the best 3D *Zelda* game, *Wind Waker*, which the series would do well to recapture on its inevitable rebirth over the next few years.



THE WITNESS

14 This unusual, sort-of-*Myst*-inspired island of maze puzzles integrates its mysterious environment into its challenges. You're always learning more about it, and little of that is superficial. It's a gorgeous, handmade landscape, and you can see why it took Jonathan Blow and company over seven years to make. But having said that, do you ever look at these inoffensive landscapes and think, "wouldn't it be good if I could land a military chopper on this then pop a bullet in some poor bastard's head?" Joking.

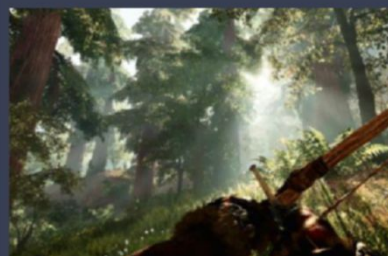


DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

15 I deliberated on this one with Andy, since Prague in *Mankind Divided* has many amazing-looking districts, and has benefited from five years of progress in videogame technology. But *Human Revolution's* Hengsha holds up. It's not huge, but the use of signage and densely packed, narrow streets creates a convincing sense that this is the bottom rung of a two-tiered futuristic city. Nothing feels over-designed, and the Hive nightclub is a standout.

FAR CRY PRIMAL

16 Andy and Tony suggested *Far Cry 4*, an equally beautiful setting that's immersive enough to keep you playing for dozens of hours, but I love *Primal's* stone age backdrop. The sound design is brilliant and often unsettling: in the distance you hear the cries of creatures that no longer exist. The effect of this untouched setting, as well as your relatively primitive powers (remote-controlled owls notwithstanding), is that you never feel entirely safe exploring it. I marginally prefer it to the other *Far Cry*s for that reason, though the whole series offers some pretty amazing places to visit.





FALLOUT 4

17 Future Boston itself is a pretty, damaged urban environment, but it's the edges of the map I love. The journey to the irradiated Glowing Sea is so memorable, as you travel from the withered trees on its outskirts to a nightmarish deathtrap filled with *Fallout*'s nastiest creatures. You find the eerie remnants of an aircraft and a church, among other things. Maybe Bethesda's post-*Oblivion* RPGs are starting to feel a little familiar in structure, but there's no doubting that the team making these worlds are at the top of their game.



HALF-LIFE 2

18 *Half-Life 2*'s world still captivates, partly because of the skilled way Valve rolls back each layer to reveal the next. It's all revealed one map at a time along your journey, until you've built up a detailed picture of this conquered world. It helps that they're always giving you something new to do. From the canals of City 17 to Ravenholm and Nova Prospekt, Valve's visual storytelling is still unparalleled. *Half-Life 2* has dated, inevitably for a 12-year-old game, but its environments still have the power to dazzle.



ALAN WAKE

19 I waited my whole life for a game set in the Pacific Northwest of Twin Peaks, then I got two in the space of about a year: *Alan Wake* and *Deadly Premonition*. *Alan Wake*'s misty forests, empty cabins and eerily unpopulated towns are the perfect setting for this mostly nighttime horror shooter. A clever recurring technique used by Remedy is the teasing of enemies and new locations in the far distance, something made possible by game engine tech originally put in place when *Alan Wake* was going to be open-world.



METRO: LAST LIGHT

20 Here's a cheerful note to end on. The post-nuclear Moscow setting of the *Metro* series offers the most beguiling and tonally bleak post-apocalypse around, whether you're in the irradiated overworld, or one of the admirably detailed underground settlements filled with NPCs telling stories

of the game's horrible setting. For me, the highlight of exploring this world came early on when I found a downed aircraft that had been rotting among the ruins for two decades. I experienced the plane's final moments in a vision, before returning to its depressing present-day remnants. Misery has never looked so attractive.

A high-quality digital rendering of a toilet in a bathroom. The toilet is white with a dark, realistic-looking bowl. It's set against a wall of square tiles. To the left, a window shows a bright sunset or sunrise over a body of water with trees. The lighting is warm and atmospheric.

LIFTING *The* LID

What virtual **TOILETS** can teach us about the art of game design.

By Andy Kelly

Behold, the toilet from *Soma*. Virtual facilities don't get much better than this. Interactive, realistic, beautiful.



T

here came a point in history when humans stopped shitting on the ground and started shitting into a receptacle, and the toilet was born. The people of Mohenjo-daro, an ancient settlement uncovered by archaeologists in Pakistan, were using toilets as far back as 2800 BC. The Romans figured out how to flush them long before the invention of the iPad. And the Han Dynasty built their toilets above pigsties so they could simultaneously empty themselves and feed their livestock.





✕ Today, the human race's obsession with the humble commode, and the activities that occur in and around it, has manifested itself in an exciting new way: the videogame toilet. I've always been fascinated by the idea that every time work begins on a new game, someone has to model, texture, animate, script, and record sound effects for something so mundane. But the truth is, videogame toilets are incredibly important.

"Toilets are valuable precisely because they have no real relevance to the game at hand," says Fullbright's Steve Gaynor. "They exist as interactive objects to flesh out the 'realness' of the game world as a functional place. It's about supporting player expectation. If there's a bathroom, there should be a toilet. And if there's a toilet, it should flush. It's these little pieces of seemingly pointless interactivity that maintain the illusion of being inside a functional other place, not just a place-shaped box."

Toilets also reveal something about the people who build them. You can tell a lot about a developer's approach to world-building by the authenticity, and flushability, of its crappers. "They're a direct peek into a studio's personality," says Blendo Games' Brendon Chung. "It's very personal and it's very revealing. We spend a lot of our lives trying to understand each other, and a toilet is a moment of vulnerability."

FAMILIAR TERRITORY

"One of the joys of toilets is how familiar we are with them," Chung adds. "I couldn't tell you the first thing about a plasma bolt cannon, but we're all familiar with the minutiae of toilets, resulting in plenty of latitude for designers to play with expectations."

Developers are well aware of players' fascination with toilets, and

they're always leaving surprises there: whether it's loot, a hidden enemy, or in *BioShock Infinite's* case, a raw potato. According to Arkane's Shawn Elliott, the man responsible for that potato, this relationship goes both ways. "The proliferation of flushable toilets nudged designers to include content in and around them," he says. "And this encouraged players to go poking around in them, which pushes designers to continue the tradition."

TURD WORLD

But why a potato? Initially, Elliott is evasive. "In an act of meta-commentary I placed a consumable potato in one of Columbia's toilets. It was an interactive pay-off for inquisitive toilet inspectors, and also an acknowledgement of the absurdity of where items are found in our world. Pineapples in cash registers and so on." He adds: "really, though, it just looked like a turd."

I asked several developers what their favorite videogame toilet was, and the same game kept coming up: Frictional's *Soma*. "There's an incredible toilet in the first few minutes," says Brendon Chung. "You have fine analog control over the toilet seat and flush handle. Flush it and you see the water swirling in the bowl. This is an absolutely luxurious amount of control reached by no other developer."

"One of the big problems in game design is figuring out what to fill the world with," says Frictional's Thomas Grip. "Offices and storage rooms are used a lot, but it can be hard to make them feel natural. But with bathrooms the space is well-defined and there are a lot of simple and fun interactions such as flush handles, stall doors, and hand-dryers."



1
ALAN WAKE
From Alan's New York apartment.

2
DEAR ESTHER
A grotty Hebridean toilet.

3
GTA V
Trevor's toilet is beyond cleaning.

4
PORTAL
Futuristic curves. Nice.

5
GONE HOME
One of the Greenbriars' many bathrooms.

WINNING STREAK

The official PC Gamer toilet rating system

Can your character actually use it?
20 points

Does it flush?
10 points

Is there a swirling water effect?
10 points

Is there toilet paper nearby?
5 points

Can you lift the lid?
5 points

Is there loot hidden in/around it?
5 points

"Many of the environments we go through in games are supposed to have been inhabited by humans," he adds. "A game might be set in a laboratory, but it needs to make sense for people to be there. And if there are, or were, humans in your environment, you certainly need to fulfill two needs: eating and shitting. Food can be handled simply with, say, food containers littered around the place. But unless the situation is really dire, humans require a specialized place to do their business. So in a way, toilets are part of the justification for having that cool laboratory."

There's something about a bathroom in a horror game that somehow puts you on edge more than any other location. "Public toilets are strange," he says. "We're surrounded by people as we do something that is very private to us. So there's an underlying tension to



visiting one. They make us feel vulnerable, which is perfect for horror.”

“They have fluorescent lights that flicker,” he adds. “They’re usually white, which is a great contrast to filth and blood. Clinical yet dirty at the same time. The stalls are a great place to hide things in, and you can use the gap in the door to give players an early hint of

A TOILET IS A PORCELAIN WINDOW INTO THE SOUL

something horrible inside. There are drains and faucets that drip and create nice ambient sounds. And there are mirrors, which you can do all kinds of scary stuff with.”

GOLD FLUSH

Actually building a videogame toilet can be a surprisingly tricky task. I ask Frictional artist Aaron Clifford, who created *Soma*’s peerless commode, about the process. “The toilet was in good shape, but I wasn’t happy with the flush. It didn’t do it justice. It was impossible to make a decent swirling effect using particle systems, so I used an animated water texture that moved along a strip of polygons. Then all I had to do was bend and twist the strip to have the water flow down the bowl.”

That’s a lot of effort and ingenuity to expend on a toilet, but it’s completely worth it. If it wasn’t there, or it didn’t flush, you’d be disappointed. “Certain players want maximum value for money,” says JP LeBreton, a designer who worked on *BioShock* and *The Cave*. “Every inch of the world must dance for them if they demand it. A player chooses, a toilet obeys.”

But toilets are more than just props. A toilet is a porcelain window into the soul of the artist who created it, and through it you can learn a lot about their personality and their design philosophy. And they reveal something about us as players too. Our expectations, desires, and what it takes to make us believe in a game world. So the next time you pass a virtual toilet and, of course, attempt to flush it, take a closer look at what happens. You may be able to divine some hidden truth about the game you’re playing and the people who made it. ■



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"ALL I CAN SAY IS: WOW." - TACTICAL GAMING



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

Wherever possible, we finish a game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions.

ALPHAS & BETAS

This means we'll review any released alpha, beta or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently buy. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time in their current state.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be hours-long new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. Either way, if we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-10% A game of absolutely no value. Are you playing one of these games? Take 3d6 emotional damage.

Examples *Big Brother*

11%-39% Yikes. Technically broken, or so fundamentally flawed that it's ultimately not worth any time or money. Bad.

Examples *The War Z, Sonic: Lost World*

40%-49% This game is functional, but majorly flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Firefall, Star Trek, Armikrog*

50%-59% Mediocre. If it has any interesting ideas, they don't work well. Might suffer from bugs or technical issues.

Examples *Primordia, Painkiller: Hell & Damnation*

60%-69% An interesting idea poorly expressed, or a derivative idea executed averagely. Comes with caveats.

Examples *SimCity, Just Cause 3, Blood Bowl 2*

70%-79% Good, but not a classic. This score is a recommendation, just not a glowing one.

Examples *Broken Age, Batman: Arkham Knight*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance.

Examples *Elite: Dangerous, Soma, Fallout 4*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Ahead of its time and important to PC gaming.

Examples *MGS V, Rainbow Six Siege, Undertale*

95%-98% This is far and away one of the best games we've ever played, and we recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program, Spelunky*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Life-changing. A masterpiece and more. Actively boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.



Winning formula

I was skeptical when Microsoft announced its return to PC gaming. And even now, with the Xbox brand bringing out some big releases, it's not clear whether the Universal Windows Platform is a good thing for PC. In the short term, though, Microsoft's current interest means we finally see *Forza Horizon* on our platform. *Horizon* has long been one of the great arcade racing series, and *Horizon 3* is probably the best of the bunch. It offers hours of entertainment, set across a big, beautiful rendition of Australia.

Microsoft's other release, *ReCore*, doesn't merit the same excitement. Luckily, plenty else this month does. Check out plucky new MOBA *Fractured Space*, or the clever improvements of *World of Warcraft: Legion*. Also, yes, there's another good *Hitman* episode.

Phil Savage

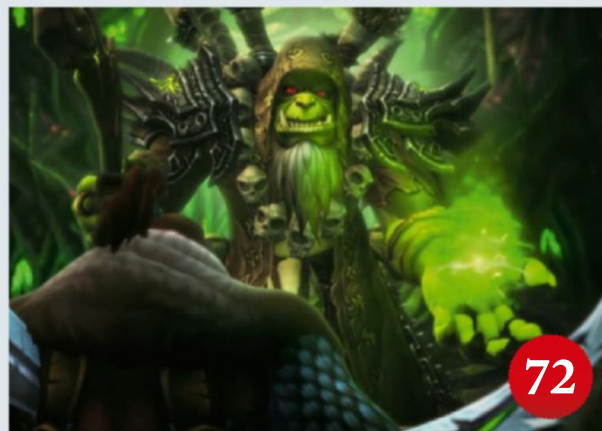
PHIL SAVAGE
DEPUTY EDITOR
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This month's space naturalists...



PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Action, Hitman

Currently playing
Forza Horizon 3

This month
Had to stop playing
Forza Horizon 3 to
review another damn
Hitman episode.



ANDY KELLY

Specialist in
Walking, Twin Peaks

Currently playing
Virginia

This month
Proceeded down the
linear path of feelings
that is burger day in
the PC Gamer office.



BEN GRIFFIN

Specialist in
Racing, rejecting
gravity

Currently playing
Redout

This month
Did all of his Ben Griffin
things, in secret, away
from the public eye.



STEVEN MESSNER

Specialist in
MMOs, tourism

Currently playing
WoW: Legion

This month
Tried to escape WoW
by visiting the UK. Nice
try, but we have it here
too Steven.



CHRIS SCHILLING

Specialist in
Violence, sideways

Currently playing
Mother Russia Bleeds

This month
Was thrown back to
the '80s. The '80s
threw him back.



CHRIS THURSTEN

Specialist in
MOBA, spaceships

Currently playing
Fractured Space

This month
Felt strong feelings
about space things.
Much the same as any
other month.



JAMES DAVENPORT

Specialist in
Action, cores

Currently playing
ReCore

This month
Befriended a glowing,
mechanical dog. Hurt
his hand trying to pet it.

FINE TUNED

FORZA HORIZON 3 is a fantastic PC debut for the series. *By Phil Savage*

What's next? I could join an exhibition race, competing against 11 other cars to be first across the finish line. Maybe I'll take a 1984 Peugeot 205 on a point-to-point race across the dusty dirt roads of the Australian outback. Maybe I'll use a Pagani Zonda for a tight, technical circuit race around Surfer's Paradise, Queensland. Perhaps I'll do both, linking these and other routes into a multi-stage championship.

Or, I could do something less daunting, such as attempt a Bucket List challenge. These give you a car and a goal: beating a skill point target in a Ford RS200, or speeding across country roads in a LaFerrari. If none of that takes my fancy, I could drive as fast as possible through a speed trap, set a distance record off a stunt jump, go looking for a classic car hidden in an abandoned barn, smash bonus boards for XP, or challenge any of the AI racers populating my open world to an ad-hoc head-to-head race. Alternatively, I could simply drift around a big field, smashing down someone's crops and hedgerows to max out my skill chain.

Forza Horizon 3 isn't just a racing game. It's a huge, varied playground full of things to do in cars. The titular Horizon is a festival, where enthusiasts come to race, pull stunts and enjoy the open road. In *Forza Horizon 3* you take over a condensed but varied slice of Australia. There

are city streets, beaches, forests, fields, and a large patch of the outback. The festival conceit is a great way to link multiple classes of vehicles racing across many different terrains, all under the umbrella of a unified celebration of competition, collaboration and skill.

You're the Kim Jong-un of improbable car festivals

I'm all for the fantasy, and the suspension of disbelief it requires. This is a world without rules, where speed cameras are repurposed to reward speeding, where smashing into oncoming traffic is no big deal, and where finding a rare, classic

car in a barn means that you now own it. It's incongruous, but necessarily so, as it allows Playground Games to get the most out of the festival concept. *Forza Horizon 3* also features the least hateful cast of any game in the series. The previous, Xbox-exclusive *Forza Horizons* were more consistently irritating in their banter. Here, the radio station DJs are intolerable, the Horizon engineer is

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A racing game set in an open world run by woeful trust fund kids.

EXPECT TO PAY
\$60

DEVELOPER
Playground Games,
Turn 10

PUBLISHER
Microsoft Game
Studios

REVIEWED ON
i5-6600K, GTX 970,
16GB RAM, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
2-12 online, 2-4 co-op

LINK
www.forza-motorsport.net



an overly enthusiastic Australian caricature, but your primary point of contact, Kiera, is merely a bit patronizing. That's hardly a ringing endorsement, but it's miles ahead of the previous games.

SPIN CONTROL

The major difference this time is that you're in charge of the festival. In terms of progression, and the way you unlock new races and challenges, it's a good switch that enables a welcome degree of choice and customization. Tonally, though, it's weird. You're no longer the scrappy underdog, making a name for yourself and earning the right to star in showcase events—the ridiculous, Top Gear style challenges that pit you against trains, helicopters, and other unlikely opponents. As festival leader, you get to participate by default. Your job is to earn fans by winning races and completing challenges. But winning all your own races is hardly great PR. You're the Kim Jong-un of improbable car festivals: creating a monument to your own brilliance at the expense of everyone else.

This is just a strange new wrinkle in a series that, for me, has always struggled to reconcile unappealing fiction with unrivaled action. And, ultimately, it doesn't hamper my enjoyment. I've played and loved every *Forza Horizon* game, and, in terms of size, scope and variety, this is the best of them. *Horizon's* challenges are enjoyable because its cars are so satisfying to drive. It's not a simulator, like *iRacing*, but nor is it a pure arcade racer, like *Burnout Paradise*. It feels realistic, but never to the point of hampering your fun. Certain cars are better suited to certain types of terrain, but you can take a hypercar onto the beach, wrestle with its skittish, nearly uncontrollable handling, and still emerge unscathed.

Over 350 cars are included at launch, with more planned as DLC. Playing with an Xbox controller, I get an immediate sense of the weight and

TOUR GUIDE

What to do in Forza Horizon 3

A
A race. You should already know what these are.

B
A street race. Like a race, but with traffic to avoid.



C
Custom Bucket Lists let you create or play user challenges.

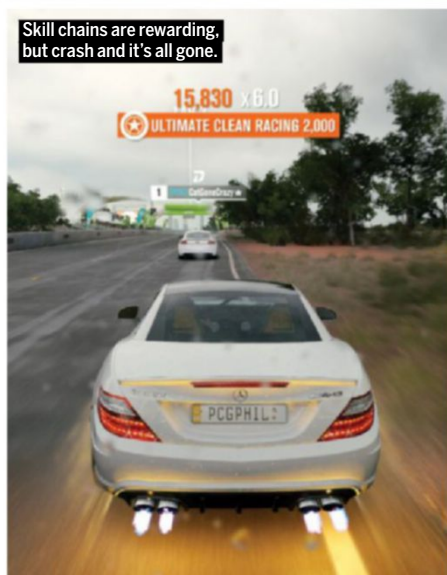
D
Showcases are *Forza's* attempt to be Top Gear with millennials.

E
Go and look at a nice, pretty bit of Australia.

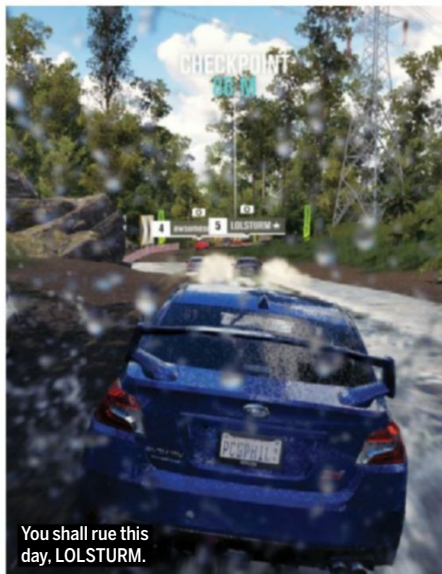
Forza Horizon 3



Live out the fantasy of being young, rich and awful.



Skill chains are rewarding, but crash and it's all gone.



You shall rue this day, LOLSTURM.



Imagine dealing with this crap on your morning commute.



Each car has an accurately modeled dashboard.

Forza Horizon 3



✧ power of each vehicle, and can feel its limitations as I turn into corners. The feedback makes driving feel tactile and instinctive. This is a series about celebrating cars, with a handling model that makes each one a pleasure to race. The breadth of vehicle types, and the variety of the world, keeps things fresh and exciting even dozens of hours in.

You can also tailor the experience to your preference and skill level. By default, *Horizon 3* is an easygoing game, with plenty of driving assists, forgiving AI opponents and the ability to rewind time to correct mistakes. Those assists can be disabled, and opponents made more skilled, and doing so increases the rewards you get at the end of the race. AI racers are based on other players, and appear in your world with their Xbox Live name. This is *Forza's* "Drivatar" system, which supposedly creates AI behavior based on a player's driving style.

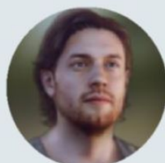
I have no idea if it works. The AI doesn't stick too rigidly to the driving line, but all of my opponents have been broadly effective. Some are maybe a little more aggressive, but I haven't discerned any distinct personalities. Still, the system is welcome because it's more interesting having familiar, recurring names appear in your races. Drivatars are more likely to be people on your friends list or in your "Club"—*Forza's* version of a guild. That familiarity breeds rivalries. I don't care about a nameless opponent, but I do care if I'm being beaten by Official Xbox Magazine's Matthew Castle.

If you'd prefer your competition less artificial, you can head online—embarking on a series of events, or simply grouping up for a free-roam adventure. Multiplayer events range from standard races, to arena modes such as capture the flag and "Infected". It's competent stuff, although I've never been a big fan of the more arcadey game types. More interesting to me is the co-op campaign, which lets up to three other players join and progress your open world. It's a great way to hang out with friends, or to get someone who's actually good at drift challenges to do them for you.

Forza Horizon 3 doesn't just succeed as a racer, but as an open-

It doesn't just succeed as a racer, but as an open-world game

NAME GAME Which of these awful player nicknames isn't in-game?



BANTASAURUS REX



EL POLLO DIABLO



ABROHAM LINCOLN



DARK LORD



BROMEO

Answer: Trick question. NPCs will call you any of this dumb shit.

world game. Each activity provides a variety of rewards. Money lets you buy new cars. XP rewards you with a "wheel spin" each time you rank up—a slot-machine payout of credits or high-end vehicles. Fans, the main currency of progression, allow you to upgrade festival sites, filling up the map with even more things to do. Best of all are skill points. These are earned for driving feats, which in *Forza Horizon 3* means everything

from drifts, near misses and clean racing, to trading paint with opponents, doing big jumps and knocking over bins.

As you chain these tricks together, the skill multiplier builds. Go a few seconds without

increasing it and you'll bank the points, putting them towards your next skill point—used to unlock a variety of passive bonuses. Crash, and you lose them all. On a long enough timeline, you're all but guaranteed to hit an oncoming vehicle as you e-drift down a winding country road. And so skill chains become the perfect risk/reward minigame on the way to each new event. It's the reason I've yet to use the fast travel option: simply driving to a destination is entertaining in and of itself.

HIGH PERFORMANCE

This is the first full *Forza* game to arrive on PC, and it does so via the Universal Windows Platform. As such, it's only available on Windows 10 through the Windows Store. On my home PC, using a GTX 970 and an i5-6600K, it runs at a solid 60fps at 1920x1200, despite my pushing some graphics options above the auto-recommended "High" setting. However, my less powerful work PC did experience some noticeable

stutter, which improved as I closed programs running in the background, but never fully abated. Seemingly this is a known issue, to be addressed in a future patch. Ultimately, I wouldn't expect to hit "Ultra" unless your rig is pretty new, and I'd advise caution if you're only just scraping the recommended settings. A demo is planned sometime after launch. If you're at all concerned about whether you're able to run the game, I'd advise waiting for that.

The upside is that the sense of speed feels exhilarating at 60 frames per second. *Forza* has always been good at selling the excitement of its fastest cars, but the PC version is a clear step up over the Xbox One's 30fps. It's a gorgeous experience too, from the lavish recreation of each car, to the vibrant color palette of the Australian setting.

Forza Horizon 3 is huge, varied and constantly entertaining. It treads a fine balance between simulation and arcade—bombastic and silly at times, but also an accomplished populist racing game. I don't like the script, the cast of irritants manning the radio stations, the way playing your own music in-game requires the use of Microsoft Groove, or the fact that one of the nicknames you can choose is "Bantersaurus Rex". More seriously, I worry Microsoft will continue its habit of integrating DLC cars and expansions in overbearing ways (*Forza Horizon 2* went as far as playing an in-game trailer for its *Storm Island* expansion). But these are annoyances I'm prepared to forgive in a game as good as this. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The best *Forza Horizon* game is now one of the best racing games on PC. It's vast, varied and lots of fun.

92





WERE YOU A PART OF THE RADEON™ REBELLION AT PAX WEST?

AMD and PC Gamer joined forces once more and brought the Radeon rebellion to PAX West. Along with the #BetterRed uprising, the booth featured new hardware, hands-on experiences with new games, tons of free swag and one-on-one time with two pro players from the Evil Geniuses DOTA 2 team (6th ranked DOTA 2 team globally, 2nd in the U.S.).

AMD brought their customary high-powered systems from its top partners, but the hardware emphasis this time was on the newly released Radeon graphics cards. Attendees got several chances at the daily raffles to win some awesome processors and GPUs to upgrade their systems at home. Players experienced AMD's pioneering LiquidVR technology in the Oculus Rift consumer VR headsets playing

Gunjack. Fans lined up for an autograph session with PPD and Universe from the Evil Geniuses and even got the chance to play against the pro players in a DOTA 2 match of their own. Lastly, exotic-enthusiast PC builds with unique setups, like a 4-way crossfire Radeon R9 Fury X graphics setup, showcased highly anticipated games from Deus Ex: Mankind Divided and Doom. Were you a part of the uprising?



LOST AND FOUND

VIRGINIA invites you to the sleepy town of Kingdom, where a boy has mysteriously disappeared. *By Andy Kelly*

The most striking thing about *Virginia* is how it uses animation, cinematography, and an orchestral score to tell its story without a single line of dialogue. No one, including protagonist Anne Tarver, utters a word, yet the characters are deep, interesting, and flawed. Tarver is an FBI agent investigating a disappearance. Her partner, Maria Halperin, leads the case, unaware that Tarver has been assigned to keep an eye on her.

Halperin's office is buried deep in the basement, a great example of how the game wordlessly reveals things about its characters. It's clear the bureau sees her as a troublemaker and is keeping her out of sight. If that reminds you of a certain 'spooky' FBI agent, it's no accident. *Virginia's* tone and aesthetic are heavily inspired by '90s TV shows.

When Tarver first introduces herself, Halperin is guarded, agitated. Almost as if she knows she's been sent to spy on her. And you can glean this entirely through her body language. The faces are stylized, but expressive enough to convey nuanced emotion.

Virginia is a series of short first-person vignettes, using frequent quick cuts to give it a dramatic, televisual energy. You wake up in your bed, then a second later you're in a car driving down the freeway. The editing is fantastic, and no scene ever outstays its welcome, although it can make the experience feel stiflingly linear at times.

No one utters a word, yet the characters are deep and interesting

Other story-focused games like *Firewatch* and *Gone Home*, although just as linear, allow you to explore and absorb their worlds at your own pace. But in *Virginia* you're pushed from one moment to the next, and there's rarely anything to interact with other than the thing that'll trigger the next scene.

Early on I tried to break away from the critical path to poke around, wondering if I'd find any additional story details. The detailed world-building seemed like it was encouraging me to do so. But, with a few exceptions, there was never anything to find, so I eventually stopped exploring altogether.

This lean, guided structure gives the game a lively pace, but diminishes your role as a player. I never really got the sense that I was inhabiting the role of Tarver. It was more like I was passively observing. *Virginia* tells a story filled with drama, emotion, and revelation, but I never felt like I was experiencing any of it first-hand.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person game about two FBI agents, set in a small town.

EXPECT TO PAY
\$10

DEVELOPER
Variable State

PUBLISHER
505 Games

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 970,
i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.variablestate.com

Despite this lack of agency, the game's exquisite sense of style kept me interested. The dream sequences are a particular highlight, using bizarre imagery and disorienting editing to explore Tarver's psyche. The music is lavish, stirring, and cinematic, and a valuable storytelling tool, filling in the blanks left by the lack of dialogue and establishing the emotional and thematic landscape.

CASE FILE

The disappearance is ultimately unimportant. *Virginia* is a story about Tarver and Halperin, and the case a means of bringing them together. The opening scenes lead you to believe you'll be finding clues and solving a mystery, but that's somewhat misleading. Really, it's a character study disguised as police procedural.

As the case slowly fades into the background, the game begins to lose focus. The story becomes more fractured and abstract, littered with symbolism and drifting in and out of reality. And although interesting artistically, the final act left me yearning for a more satisfying, or at least more structured, denouement.

I don't mind a story being left open to interpretation—in fact, when it's done well, I prefer it—but I couldn't help but feel that *Virginia's* last moments were self-consciously abstruse. Like the writers were actively trying to confuse you.

But there's nothing else quite like it on PC. It's beautifully presented, atmospheric, and has one of the best videogame scores in recent years. But perhaps its greatest accomplishment is how, with a completely silent narrative, its cast is somehow more interesting than characters from other games who have thousands of lines of dialogue. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A slick, stylish cinematic thriller, but your interaction is limited and the story loses focus in the final act.

72

LOCAL COLOR *Places to visit in Kingdom*



1 LOOKOUT POINT

Offers a sweeping view of the town below.

2 AIR FORCE BASE

Signs warn people to stay away from here.

3 DINER

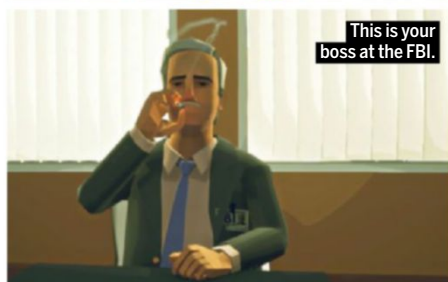
The heart of any small American town.

4 ROAD HOUSE

Stop for beer and haunting music.

5 OBSERVATORY

The investigation leads our agents here.



RETURN OF THE MACH

An anti-gravity racer rebirth, and faster than a falling horse, **REDOUT** also inherits the genre's flawed genes. *By Ben Griffin*

There's no adequate yardstick with which to measure the screaming pace of this futuristic anti-gravity racer, since the fastest you've ever traveled is that time you had quickly melting ice-cream in the back seat of your car. The slowest you go here is ten times that. The product of a team so fed up of waiting for a new *F-Zero* or *Wipeout* they decided to make their own, this racing game plays like an love letter to both written in UV paint.

The general aim is to bomb down each course in a bid to finish before your competitors, but there are exceptions: Arena Race is a weapons-based mode sans respawns that rages until one ship has withstood all the damage unleashed by shield-sapping power-ups and ram-happy rivals. Speed is about staying above a target pace to knock seconds off your time, while Score deals points for hitting turbos and achieving fastest laps. Boss is an imaginative endurance sprint linking multiple tracks via teleporter, and the punishing Instagib turns wall damage deadly.

Race is the one you'll return to, however, featuring three short laps against aggressive opponents. It's what Captain Falcon would have wanted, rest his soul.

If you've ever wondered what 900km/h is, it's buildings whizzing by like they've been slicked in oil and flung down a supermarket aisle. It's shiny exhausts emanating snaking trails of luminous neon that hang in

the air, stubbornly contesting the speed of light. A shaking camera emulates eye-watering velocity by blurring at the sides and permitting a small pinhole of sight in the center, while a pounding dynamic soundtrack accelerates as you do.

At 120fps, blisteringly swift events play out like an extended Inception kick, but they're quick to restart after losses, too. That's useful, because *Redout* is a racer that demands you learn track layouts, each twist and turn committed to memory and possibly practiced in the bath like an

overly dedicated bobsledder.

There are two necessary concessions. The first is course design that, although soaring you over Cairo jumps, winding you through Alaskan loops, and corkscrewing you like shampoo down a plughole, serves up the same basic lane type. It's flat, shiny, narrow, and flanked by so many walls you feel more like a bowling ball than a pilot blessed with

Course design corkscrews you like shampoo down a plughole

EARTH AND TURF *Three regions you'll whizz through*



CAIRO

Long and lazy hairpins are a good introduction to drifting, and massive ramps a perfect chance to shout "Wheee!"



ALASKA

The action gets devious when you head to these icy routes filled with sharp turns and dizzying loops.



ABRUZZO

The Turin-based developers' nod to their home base of Italy, set in the shade of lush forestry and blossom.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A futuristic hover racer in the mold of *F-Zero* and *Wipeout*.

EXPECT TO PAY

\$35

DEVELOPER

34BigThings

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel i7 x980 3.33GHz, 9GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 980 Ti

MULTIPLAYER

Online

LINK

34bigthings.com

superhuman reflexes. The second gotcha is the somewhat simplistic handling that looks better than it feels. It's mostly about constant throttling with occasional prods of the right stick/arrow keys to strafe around particularly nasty corners. Floaty weight plagues normal car racers, so imagine how worse that is when your vehicle actually levitates.

TURBO CHARGE

Different ships have different ratings and you can sample the range in a well-structured career that gives you cash to purchase new ones and upgrade them, provided you make the podium. It's essentially a big mixed playlist swerving between game types and courses with such regularity it's hard to be bored. How the vehicles control varies nicely, too. On tracks with long straights you'll want the nippy vanguard, for example, and in more congested tracks a sturdy centaur excels.

Career offers a hook where you're earning money to road test new and creatively designed rigs. You can purchase power-ups: EMP blasts, energy drains, repair drones, and more passive boosts—but the interplay is more awkward than aggressive, a puny status effect with negligible bearing on your race's outcome. The 12-person online multiplayer at least goes some way to capturing some hustle and bustle, although in my experience rooms fill up slowly.

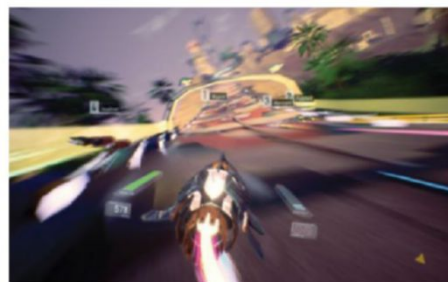
Despite catapulting the genre into a new visual realm packing kinetic wallop, *Redout* also demonstrates what little you can do with it. Fierce speed proves more a liability than asset for necessarily basic controls, weak weapons, and functionally samey track architecture. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

It nails the look, the sound, and the speed of a futuristic racer, but *Redout* stalls on the sensation.

67



OWN GOAL

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2017's PC version doesn't make the Premier League. *By Lee Hall*

Like a soccer manager resting players for a second-rate cup game, Konami again appears to be treating the PC as a distraction from the main prize of console sales. *PES 2017* is another inter-generational hybrid that looks more like the Xbox 360 than the Xbox One game. It's an accomplished—brilliant at times—sim and an improvement on last season's effort, but it could, and should, be as good as the console game in every detail.

Get past this and you're into a happy kind of place. A place where subtle moments speak of a deep understanding in the fabric of the code of what makes the game of soccer so very, very beautiful. The AI is a perennial joy, and not just in terms of apparently adaptive opposing players. Your virtual teammates are intelligent and appear sensitive to your desire for skillful soccer. They are almost always switched on to the possibility of a defense-splitting pass, taking up positions that enable you to outclass your rivals.

There's also a quiet appreciation—especially if you turn off the poor commentary—for the joy of a long pass. It's something that's largely overlooked in the *FIFA* series, but that's the soccer equivalent of a sniper rifle headshot on a moving target—tricky, satisfying and fatal. Chipped through balls and sprayed long passes are as relevant here as button-mashed dribbling skills.

There's also a quiet appreciation for the joy of a long pass

All of which keeps matches ticking along nicely, something some online commenters claim breaks down during online play. That wasn't my experience. The main issue for me was the scarcity of opponents, not lag, with the only breaks in the flow of the game coming from sluggish advancement through CGI

sequences—an irritating drain on realism, but hardly fatal.

Hamstrung by EA gobbling up commercial tie-ins for its *FIFA* series, licensed club, player and stadium names in *Pro Evo* remain few and far between. Wearside versus Man Red not only sounds naff, but it shatters the illusion of realism. Though the likes of Barcelona and annual victims Arsenal are present and correct.

This is soccer with a soccer brain and without the gloss. But that's not to say the action on the pitch is perfect. There are moments of serious frustration, when a lack of footwork finesse causes play to break down needlessly. And players still

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Soccer simulation for those without a console.

EXPECT TO PAY
\$50

DEVELOPER
PES Productions

PUBLISHER
Konami

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 8GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 960

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 22

LINK
www.konami.com/wepes

echo the ghost of the mechanical, 180-degree turning that was a calling card of the series from back when the internet was something AC Milan kept hitting at the San Siro stadium.

STARS ON PAR

On the upside of unlicensed content, *PES* is largely immune to the fawning deference for big name players that is standard elsewhere. Rather than cloggers and superstars appearing to belong to different species, the likes of Zlatan Ibrahimovic—an early loan signing for my struggling Tyneside team—stand out, but don't dominate play. While his rapier-like shots aren't automatic, your inadequate tap of the shoot button or crazily over-hit corner-kicks are modified by some cuddly power bar fairies to save the big man's blushes. And yours too.

You're far more likely to be left red-faced and your player red-carded by the sliding tackle. Don't be deceived by the tutorial, which reverts to a closer cropped third-person camera that is pretty much unplayable in games. Timing tackles is very difficult—a fact that reflects reality, but also dials down the fun.

In other respects *Pro Evo* remains true to its arcade roots. It's certainly one of the most “gamified” soccer sims. The achievements system as you build a team in myClub mode features hundreds of rewards for feats such as signing new stars, or simply opening transfer negotiations. You can even earn contract extensions for managers for free by hitting performance benchmarks, otherwise you'll need to use up rewards or splash your cash.

If you already have it on console you'll be throwing good money after bad. A pity, as *PES 2017* should be a seminal game on PC. ■

WORST OF THREE

Why the poor PC port?

By a beautifully rendered hair's breadth *PES 2017* on PS4 is the graphically definitive version, while the PC game is the most inferior. There's no plausible reason for Konami to skip here other than money. So, in effect, it's sending a bad message to PC players. Officially the game is a mix of previous and current gen design, suggesting a tired engine is being flogged to death.



IMAGE CREDIT: GANDYLAND—WWW.BIT.TV/203ARVZ

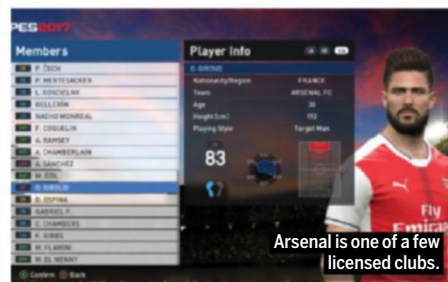
PC GAMER VERDICT

A very good soccer game, but we're once again being fobbed off with a console-light experience.

71



Sliding in is ill-advised.



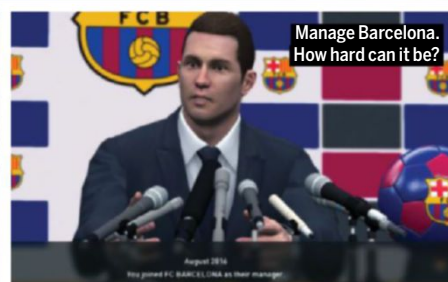
Arsenal is one of a few licensed clubs.



Even scoreless draws are eventful in PES.



Hand-holding directional arrows? Check.



Manage Barcelona. How hard can it be?



DEMON DAYS

Representing **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** at its best, **LEGION** sets the stage for one of the most memorable chapters in its history. *By Steven Messner*

Legion bears a terrible weight. In some ways, it feels like an apology for the mistakes made during the previous *WoW* expansion, *Warlords of Draenor*. Those mistakes led many to believe the MMO's days were numbered. Now *Legion* is tasked with not only making up for lost time, but also proving that *World of Warcraft* still has time left. Despite all this, *Legion* is the most confident expansion Blizzard has ever made.

The Burning Legion's invasion of Azeroth might be one of the most dire conflicts explored in the game, an impression driven home by the intro that pulls a few pages from *Game of Thrones* in nonchalantly killing off important characters. But that confidence I see in *Legion* doesn't just come from the story—it comes from

understanding that this is Blizzard's sixth expansion. As I imagine the Lord Illidan would say, they are prepared.

The pre-expansion introduction to *Legion* starts and, if you're with the Alliance, ends with a bang, but I was a little disappointed that it didn't keep up that D-Day-style tension beyond its opening chapter. Where *Warlords of Draenor* captured the feeling of invading a hostile land and establishing a tenuous foothold, the first few hours of *Legion* feel safe and not nearly as dramatic. I was let

down at first, but once I ventured out into the new zones and began digging into their questlines, I hardly cared.

Each of the new zones demonstrates Blizzard's experience in storytelling and world design at its best. They're gorgeous, and effortlessly funnel me from one quest to the next. The rainy coastline of

Azsuna is my favorite. The crumbling elven ruins that dot its somber landscape evoke a sad beauty. The quest about the ghost of a prince seeking redemption is just as tragic. A generous sprinkling of voice

acting and cutscenes throughout these quests help me sympathize with the characters I fight alongside.

It's almost odd that things seem so bleak when, at the same time, I'm having so much damn fun. At their heart, the quests in *Legion* remain focused on collecting and killing, but each one takes a chore and turns it

It's odd that things seem so bleak when I'm having so much damn fun

A DEMON HUNTER'S PLAYLIST

Being this edgy isn't easy, so here are some tunes to help

SONG	ARTIST	YEAR
▶ Antichrist Superstar	Marilyn Manson	1996
▶ Dark Passion Play	Nightwish	2007
▶ The Sickness	Disturbed	2004
▶ Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge	My Chemical Romance	2004
▶ Sing the Sorrow	AFI	2003
▶ Sinner	Drowning Pool	2001

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A demon-obsessed expansion with a renewed affection for the fantasy.

EXPECT TO PAY

\$50

DEVELOPER

Blizzard Entertainment

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, i5 3570K, 16GB RAM, GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER

MMO

LINK

us.battle.net/wow/en/legion/



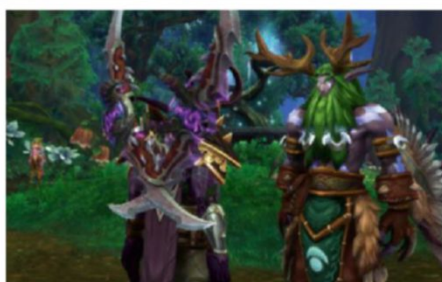
into a game of charades where you never know what you're expected to do next. Where there isn't a unique wrinkle, such as using a squadron of drakelings to destroy defensive towers while an insane mage rains magic missiles on my head, there's always some oddball character stuck in some bizarre predicament, like the pack of stranded sailors being used in Pokémon battles by giants. Even a simple escort quest became delightful when the scheming, mana-addicted elf I rode alongside had to frequently stop to feed his cravings.

There are times when *Legion* is outright silly, injecting a wonderful sense of personality into its characters. I don't see a question mark on my map as some chore to be completed on my quest to level 110, but an invitation for fun.

The meat of *Legion's* endgame won't be available for a few weeks, but the world quest system is a smart revamp of daily quests that should keep *Legion* from feeling stale. World quests are essentially *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls'* adventure mode stitched onto *Warcraft*, and turn the entirety of the Broken Isles into an endgame zone at 110—meaning I'm not stuck in the same area repeating the same quests over and over, but jumping around the Broken Isles day to day completing a variety of objectives for better loot drops. Once the proper endgame is released, I hope to have a better idea of whether or not *Legion* will become stale months down the road. For now, I'm optimistic that as long as Blizzard can keep pace, *Legion's* endgame will be more accessible and satisfying than *Warlords of Draenor* ever was.

STAYING CLASSY

Still, questing for hours on end can be a grind no matter how inventive the quests, so I'm always relieved when *Legion* gives me an excuse to take a quick break. Tending to the new order halls that serve as my headquarters breaks things up every few hours. In the most reductive



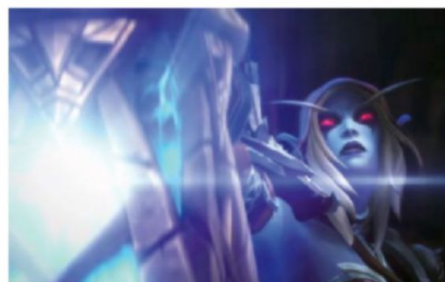
World of Warcraft: Legion



Druids' artifact weapons also alter their shapeshifted forms.



Two tauren warbraves take on a pretty pissed off rock thing.



Runas is an elf who likes mana crystals a lot.

Runas the Shantied



Some order halls have extra perks: the Dreamgrove has portals to various locales.

✧ sense, order halls are the garrisons of *Warlords of Draenor*. While I still have followers I send out on missions that can take days to complete, there are only five to manage instead of dozens. I like not having to worry about erecting and leveling buildings, instead investing in a simple, more focused system of researching new upgrades to my base. Best of all, I'm no longer alone when I'm in my order hall as I was with garrisons. It's fun to return home and see all my druid brethren hanging out together.

While the functionality of order halls is great for establishing some longer term goals, my favorite aspect represents something that *WoW* has been lacking for years: class identity. Each order hall is unique to its class, and all evoke the associated mythos and personality in powerful ways. The Dreamgrove, which druid players call home, is an enchanting meadow that feels heavy with ancient mysticism. The Fel Hammer, the demonic spaceship where demon hunters kick back after a day of murder, is burning with nefarious green energy amid the gnashing of the demon prisoners chained to its walls.

Each class has a generous number of quests that help further this renewed sense of identity. I love digging deeper into the lore of my druid, and many quests require abilities unique to my character, some that I would never use in any other context. It's a great feeling to dust off an old spell for some clever use, but more than that, there's a selfish satisfaction in knowing that I'm doing something not everyone else can.

That sense of affection I'm beginning to feel for my character might just be the most rewarding part of *Legion* for me. For the first time, I don't just feel like I'm playing a druid—I am a druid. Not that I'm frolicking around in the forest behind my house and trying to commune with trees, but *Legion* has me more curious about roleplaying in *World of Warcraft* than I've ever been.

There's no better way to see *Warcraft's* improved class identity than to take the new demon hunters for a spin. They are, without a doubt, the most well-realized class that Blizzard has ever created. I'm not fond of their dour emo nature, but that's easy to ignore as my demon

GROUP THERAPY *Five teammates who will drive you crazy in dungeons*



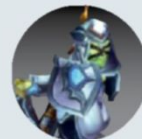
The **PROTECTION WARRIOR** who rushes everyone

"I have ten minutes before I have to leave, let's do this."



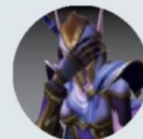
The overconfident **MARKSMAN HUNTER**

"How much fun would it be if I aggroed every monster? Pretty fun, right?"



The masochistic **HOLY PRIEST**

"Oh baby, tell me again how it's all my fault..."



The embarrassed **RETRIBUTION PALADIN**

"Please don't look at my DPS. Please don't look at my DPS."

hunter transforms into a savage monstrosity and obliterates a pack of murlocs with laser beams that shoot out of his damn eyeballs. While I don't find them quite alluring enough to consider switching from my druid, demon hunters are badassess of the highest order.

What makes demon hunters so fun, especially their damage-dealing specialization, is how agile they feel in and out of combat. Whether I'm dashing through a pack of monsters, backflipping away from an attack, or just using their bat-like

wings to glide through the air, I always feel like the coolest thing to walk Azeroth since Arthas first took hold of Frostmourne.

LEGACY & LORE

If there's one element of *Legion* that attempts to contribute to that fantasy but falls short, it's the new artefact weapons. Each class specialization now has its own unique weapon that will stay with them until the next expansion, growing in strength alongside the character that wields it. I'm somewhat indifferent to the way artefact weapons work, however. On one hand, I like that they earn their own form of experience points that I can use to unlock nodes in a talent tree, augmenting my abilities. On the other, I resent the way they attempt to appear so legendary and one of a kind when every other player of the same specialization shares the same weapon. There are cosmetic options to alter the appearance of the weapon to try to make it more unique, but I'm not convinced it's a better system

than the traditional method of farming better weapons from dungeons and raids. Fortunately, the weird disconnect that artefact weapons create isn't powerful enough to detract from the enthusiasm I have for what *Legion* accomplishes elsewhere.

When it comes to that enthusiasm and those accomplishments, however, there's one massive caveat: *Warlords of Draenor* had me just as excited at launch before Blizzard ignored it for over a year, leading to one of the darkest times in *Warcraft's* history. With the quality of questing, order halls, and restored class identity *Legion* provides, I feel optimistic that Blizzard is keen to win back my lost faith, but an expansion isn't wholly defined by its opening chapter—the updates that follow will ultimately determine how we remember it.

But while much of the endgame, such as raids and the "Mythic+" dungeons, aren't available yet, *Legion* already represents *World of Warcraft* at its all-time best. Even after the weeks spent in the beta and now with the official release, its weakest elements, such as the artefact weapons, can't get in the way of how much fun I'm having exploring the Broken Isles. *Legion's* ultimate legacy may depend on what's to come, but what's available now has me excited about *World of Warcraft* in a way I haven't felt since my dwarf hunter took his first steps into Dun Morogh a decade ago. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

If Blizzard can continue to deliver, *Legion* sets the stage for what could be the best chapter of *World of Warcraft* yet.

90



THWACK IN THE USSR

Ultraviolence doesn't pay in the grimly monotonous **MOTHER RUSSIA BLEEDS**. *By Chris Schilling*

In this side-scrolling brawler you play one of four down-and-outs in the Soviet Union of the mid-1980s, eking out a living by competing in organized street brawls. You're subjected to a laboratory experiment, the side-effects of which manifest in the form of disturbing hallucinations that make your avatar spontaneously vomit. It's a rare puddle of green amid a river of red, as your revenge mission quickly takes a turn for the extremely bloody.

The corpses in your wake remain rather than flickering out: one of a handful of contemporary flourishes in a game that otherwise plays things by the brawler handbook. Bringing the pain are Sergei, your classic all-rounder; Natasha, the archetypal weak-but-nimble woman; Ivan, the slow-moving brute; and Boris, who trades a bit of speed for extra power. They're armed with a fairly standard moveset, with punches, kicks and grabs that can be modified with the jump button or dodge buttons. Degradable weapons can be prised from enemies or punched from containers. Predictable stuff, but one stage does let you cave in enemy faces with an accordion.

The additional wrinkle is Nekro, a drug upon which the four have become dependent. You can inject this to heal yourself, or take an overdose to temporarily enter a rage mode where your attacks are more powerful, including bone-crunching

finishers that make the screen shake and your controller buzz violently. If you're short on Nekro, you can harvest it from convulsing corpses, and if you're feeling generous you can even use it to heal or revive allies.

Your journey takes you through eight long levels, the game's pixel art effectively capturing the grime and decay of the have-nots' grotty stomping grounds and the sleazy, corpulent excesses of the haves. Levels inevitably conclude with boss battles that boast some inventive touches. In one, a combine harvester

inexorably advances from the left of the screen; naturally, you need to keep your distance, but also stay close enough that you can thump the boss into its threshing blades. Later, you lob flashbangs to blind a soldier wearing night-vision goggles, having goaded him into the path of a train that rumbles across the screen.

Though the scoring system incentivizes creativity by awarding

One stage does let you cave in enemy faces with an accordion

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An old-school scrolling brawler with contemporary bloodletting.

EXPECT TO PAY \$15

DEVELOPER Le Cartel

PUBLISHER Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON Intel Core i5-4440 @ 3.1GHz, 8GB

MULTIPLAYER 2-4 (local)

LINK motherrussia bleeds.com

more points for those who mix up their moves, at times the challenge is so arduous you'll resort to cheaper tactics. The low slide is outrageously useful against most opponents. Another successful strategy is to repeatedly back off and launch a flying knee to clear some space. The downside is that you'll often send enemies off the edge of the screen, from where some ranged attackers can hit you without being visible. (Though the same is true even before you've sent them flying.)

RUSSIAN TO THE END

At least the game is fairly generous with its checkpoints—though some of them come before story scenes (which can be skipped) and the preamble to boss encounters (which can't). But given the length of these battles, it doesn't feel like much of a kindness. The sheer volume of enemies kills the pacing of some of the better set-pieces.

It helps to share the load, and if you don't have an available partner, you can call upon the services of an AI bot. Alas, they're comically inconsistent and tactically inept, throwing grenades at your feet and refusing to heal you even with a full Nekro gauge.

Past the halfway point, the game descends into grinding tedium, even weaker opponents taking far too much punishment before they stop getting up. Disillusionment sets in.

It perhaps says something about our collective desensitization to interactive violence that a game in which you can uppercut a pimp's head from his torso and then use it to bludgeon a drug addict to death isn't really doing much we haven't seen before. A depressing thought at the end of this grisly little game. ■

FINISH HIM! *Each brawler's insta-kill special, rated*



SERGEI
Finisher: Bone Remover
Wince rating: **5/10**
Sure, they're not getting up from a decapitation, but it's actually pretty funny to watch.



IVAN
Finisher: Scanners Impression
Wince rating: **7/10**
A squeeze that pops skulls like watermelons. Disgusting, but cool.



NATASHA
Finisher: Emergency Tracheotomy
Wince rating: **9/10**
The way enemies collapse after this throat-ripping attack is shiver-inducing.

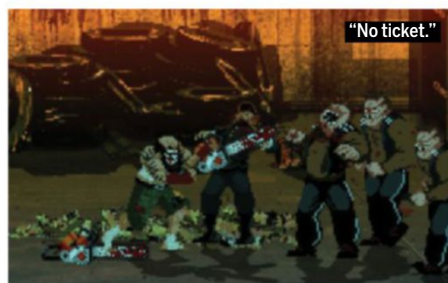
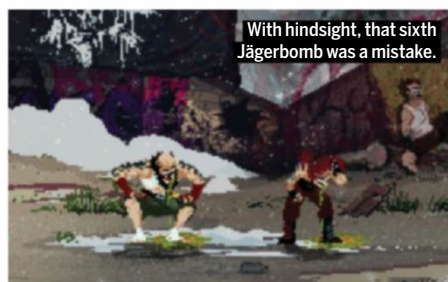


BORIS
Finisher: Backstreet Chiropractor
Wince rating: **8/10**
Lifts enemies above his head, breaks them in half over his knee. Cracking.

PC GAMER VERDICT

This savage brawler has its moments, but it has nothing clever to say and swiftly moves from brutal to boring.

54



MOBA-TTLESTAR

Massive starships collide in
FRACTURED SPACE. By Chris Thursten

Three red arrows indicate enemy ships clustered around our forward base in beta sector, attempting to wrest control of the station from its two friendly defenders. My ship—a Colossus-class cruiser, 1.7km of armor and firepower—is scorching down a hyperspace tunnel, fresh from a respawn. I pick a jump destination in beta and change my bearing to match the little red arrow closest to my exit point. The jump drive spools up.

My Colossus snaps out of hyperspace in a flash of white light. Having already lined up the broadside, I'm firing before that little red arrow—now a 1.4km-long Sentinel-class warship—can react. The Colossus's starboard flak guns open up with a sound like the drums from the Battlestar Galactica intro. The Sentinel cracks apart before exploding in a shockwave of orange flame. I've either saved the day, or warped across space and time to steal somebody's kill, depending on who you ask.

Fractured Space is a free to play, team-based game of online capital ship warfare. There's a little bit of *World of Tanks* in its DNA: outside of a match, you collect an ever-enlarging hangar full of massive starships and upgrade them using resources earned through play or microtransactions. Inside a match, however, *Fractured Space* is more like a MOBA.

In the standard mode, Conquest, space is divided into five sectors: two "side" sectors, alpha and beta, a central sector, gamma, and one home sector for each team. The objective is to capture the enemy's home base, but to do that your team has to open up jump routes by capturing forward bases in alpha or beta. Every couple of minutes, a massive mining station in gamma becomes active. The team who captures gamma gets a buff that becomes more powerful as the game goes on—quite a lot like *League of Legends'* dragon.

You've got three-dimensional control of your ship's movement, although your degree of pitch and roll is limited: which is to say that

you can move up and down but not flip over. It feels sufficiently like commanding a spaceship, but it's not a simulation. Combat is a matter of judgement and cooldown management rather than twitch skill. While there's a degree of manual aim involved, the macroscale decisions you make are far more important. At what range is your ship most effective? How do you get into an ideal firing position? What is your opponent thinking, and where do your

teammates need you to be?

Space is packed with cover in the form of asteroids. These are vital strategically but it's worth noting that the "full" feeling of space can chip away at the fantasy from time to time.

***Fractured Space* is in a good place as it leaves early access**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Team-based space combat between massive capital ships.

EXPECT TO PAY
Free with microtransactions

DEVELOPER
Edge Case Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 4GHz, 16GB RAM, GTX 980

MULTIPLAYER
Online-only, 10-player competitive or 5 against the AI.

LINK
www.fracturedspace.com

When massive warships are lined up and going at it, *Fractured Space* looks and sounds spectacular—but there are equally moments when it doesn't quite work, such as when a 2km juggernaut bounces off a space-rock like a wayward bumper car.

CRACK SHIPS

There are just north of 40 ships available at present, three made available after the tutorial and the rest unlocked through play or payment. Although they fit into broad roles—defense, offense, support and so on—there's laudable variety. The Colossus is a heavy defense ship that places its bulky armor between enemy fire and vulnerable friendlies before moving in to tackle the foe at close range. Another heavy defender, the Destroyer, prefers to set up at the back and keep the enemy at bay with devastating long-range firepower.

Personal favorites include the cloaking Ghost and the Equalizer, a lightning-fast utility ship that's great at slipping past the enemy to disrupt their back line. I admire but am useless with the Paragon, a massive starborne aircraft carrier that requires deft micromanagement of multiple fighter squadrons to be effective. There's loads to discover in this deep roster of ships, and getting attached to a few favorites helps to take the sting out of the grind.

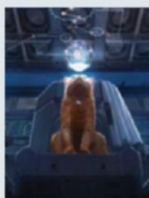
Fractured Space is in a good place as it leaves early access: the core game is strategic, rewarding, and quite unlike anything else you might play at the moment. The player base is healthy enough to mean that you can find a game of Conquest whenever you like. More modes, ships and features would do a lot to round the game out, but this is a solid foundation to build on. ■

CREWED HUMOR

Fractured Space's crew cards enhance your ship's capabilities—and give the devs the chance to slip in some on-the-nose nods to the game's inspirations.



SARA KRACE
Sound familiar? One of *Fractured Space's* most capable fighter commanders is a dead ringer for Battlestar's Kara "Starbuck" Thrace.



CAPTAIN JONESY
Command your vast capital ship as Ripley's cat from *Alien*. Yes, he can talk. No, you've got no excuse not to pick him.



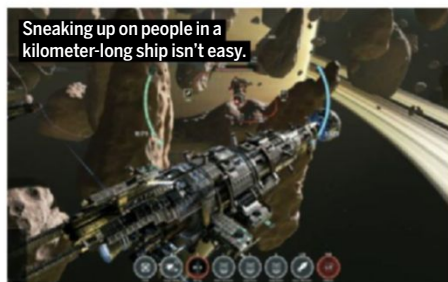
GOSS REZNIK
Hmm... does he look a bit like Gordon Freeman to you? No? Fine! I'll figure out what "Goss Reznik" is an anagram of for myself.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An original and deep game of strategic online warfare that brings your sci-fi capital ship fantasies to life.

82

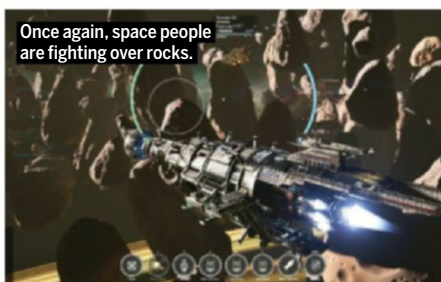
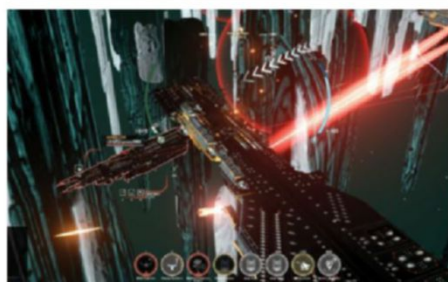
Fractured Space



Sneaking up on people in a kilometer-long ship isn't easy.



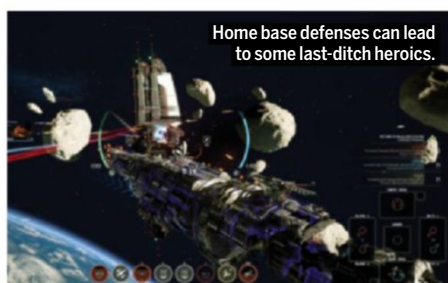
The warp drive looks lovely, but makes you vulnerable.



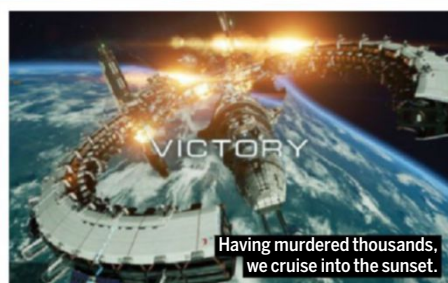
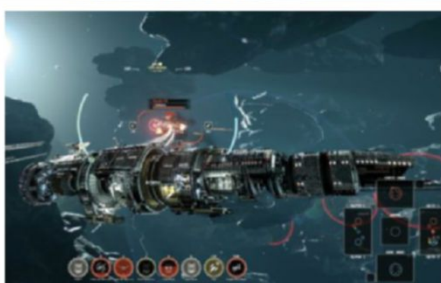
Once again, space people are fighting over rocks.



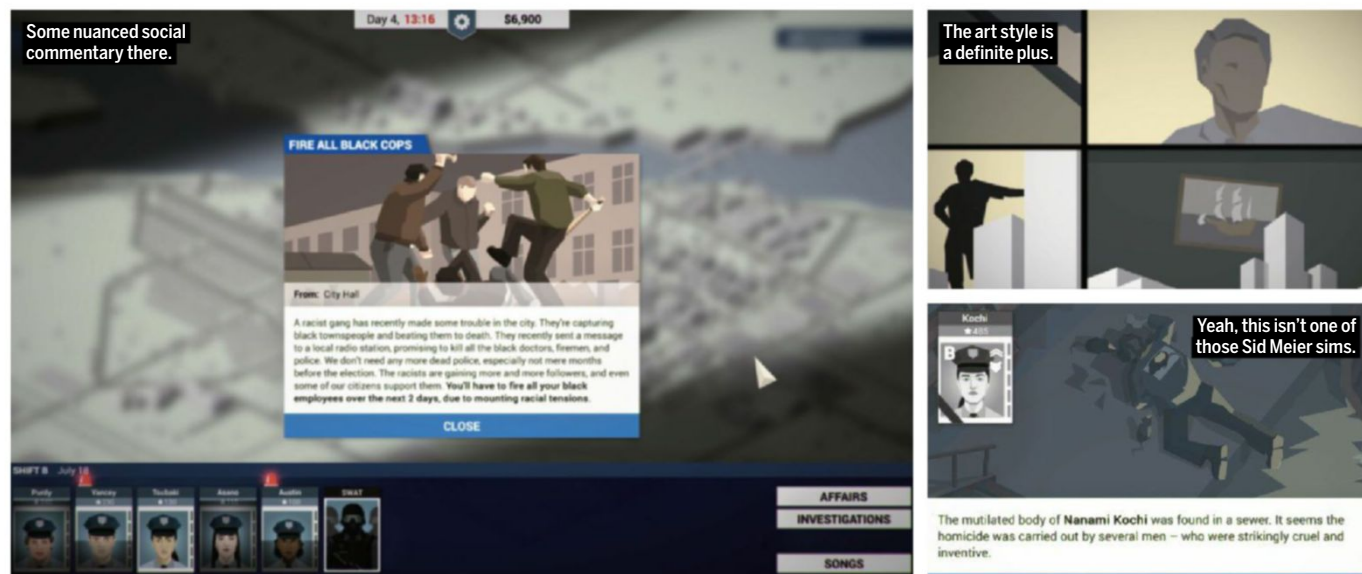
That ship had 5,000 crew. I should have 5,000 kills.



Home base defenses can lead to some last-ditch heroics.



Having murdered thousands, we cruise into the sunset.



THIN BLUE WHINE

THIS IS THE POLICE reads you your rights, but commits several wrongs. *By Kate Gray*

Freeburg is a broken city, and only chief of police Jack Boyd can save it. Unfortunately, he's being forced into retirement, and told to keep his head down if he wants a nice nest-egg. Easy enough—until the Mafia comes knocking. Soon, he's embroiled in the very corruption he's been avoiding his whole life, and firmly under the thumb of Christopher Sand, the friendly philanthropist who's secretly the head of the Mafia. So far, so noir.

Your task is to take care of the city's crime. Each day between the hours of 7am and 9pm, and often even later, you decide how many police officers to send out in response to real-time crimes that pop up on a top-down view of Freeburg, all to the sound of a smooth, jazzy clarinet.

There's a sort of strategy to it. Do you risk sending all your officers, and having no one to help out on the next call, or send fewer and hope they can

handle it? Which crimes can you afford to ignore until they time out? Will you choose to overlook an experienced officer's misdemeanors, or fire him for coming in drunk?

Occasionally, a routine response will escalate into a series of multiple-choice menus: will you shoot the suspicious package or call in a bomb squad? Your choices matter, the best

ones resulting in zero casualties, but disappointingly, you rarely get any kind of follow-up. Some kind of outcome or closure would be nice, but instead it's just on to the next crime, ad infinitum.

About 15 minutes in, City Hall demands that you fire all your black cops

The story in general is excellent, cutscenes unfolding a truly interesting tale of corruption and Boyd's attempt to keep himself together. However, a vein of tone-deaf writing that emerges very early on can leave you feeling uneasy.

About 15 minutes in, City Hall demands that you fire all your black cops, because of racist gangs. Around the same time, a peaceful feminist protest is happening, and again, City Hall demands that you break it up with as much force as possible. It's something between a clumsy attempt at shock value and a clumsy attempt

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A strategy/simulation game that casts you as chief of police.

EXPECT TO PAY
\$15

DEVELOPER
Weappy

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5-4590 CPU @ 3.3GHz, 8GB RAM, AMD Radeon R9 270, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.weappy-studio.com/titp

at making a modern political statement. The writers try to say something, but are unwilling to follow through with enough boldness to make it worthwhile. Ignoring these blatantly bigoted requests has few consequences, and following orders doesn't change the story at all. What's the point in including incredibly politically charged decisions if they don't really mean anything?

This game's main flaw is its unwillingness to deal out lessons. It can be fun and engrossing, especially for the first few hours, but occasionally feels lumpy and awkward, an idea teetering on the edge of brilliance. It looks fantastic, and the sound design is impressively thoughtful and suitably noir. But once all that becomes background to the interactive part, it's easy to notice what's missing: consequences, closure, and feeling like what you do matters somehow. In the end, you wonder if Jack Boyd should have just retired on day one. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

This is the Police looks and sounds gorgeous, but becomes dull and repetitive after the first couple of hours.

65

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The home of technology

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FATAL ERROR

Develop an uneasy relationship with an artificial intelligence in the retro-futuristic **EVENT[0]**. By Andy Kelly

The Nautilus is a luxury space yacht drifting somewhere near Europa. The crew is missing, the ship falling apart, and the AI that governs it seriously broken. It's a hell of a place to find yourself, but here you are, 350 million miles from home, alone, and at the mercy of Kaizen, a machine suffering from extreme mood swings. And because of the game's alternate-1980s timeline, you can only communicate with it through chunky computer terminals.

You talk to Kaizen by typing, and it responds in a garbled computer-generated voice. You can ask it about the Nautilus and what happened to the crew. You can ask it if it's having a nice day, if it has any friends, and how it feels, or, more practically, to open doors, cycle airlocks, and switch on lights. But the responses will vary.

Sometimes Kaizen is friendly. It'll call you "buddy" and open a door when you ask it to. But sometimes it'll refuse. Which it did, in one instance, when I was floating outside the ship in an EVA suit with a rapidly

dwindling air supply. It's dangerously unpredictable like that, which makes for an interesting relationship. I had to apologize for being rude in an earlier conversation so it would let me in, which was a strange feeling. You may regret pissing Kaizen off.

Sometimes it doesn't respond to what you're saying at all. You'll ask it something and it'll ramble about what your next objective is, or say some scripted, unrelated line.

Because, of course, it's not really an advanced artificial intelligence. It's an elaborate chatbot that, occasionally, does a surprisingly good job of persuading you that it's a thinking thing with a personality. It also often fails to respond convincingly, or at all, to completely basic questions. But again, this is an indie sci-fi game, not

an actual AI. There's a reason no one has made one of those yet.

Typing messages into the terminals and receiving responses feels wonderfully intimate, more so than if you were just selecting sentences

from a dialogue wheel. When it's not trying to kill you, Kaizen reveals a vulnerable, needy side. You almost feel sorry for it. Sometimes, in the crew lounge, it'll play the piano for you, which is strangely comforting. And slightly eerie.

It's through interacting with Kaizen that you unlock parts of the Nautilus and journey deeper in. Along the way you learn what happened to the crew, but Kaizen is

I had to apologize for being rude, which was a strange feeling

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A game about making friends with a broken AI.

EXPECT TO PAY

\$20

DEVELOPER

Ocelot Society

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 970, i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.event0game.com

vague, almost as if it's trying to hide something. You have to piece the story together yourself by reading logs stored in terminals and studying the detailed environments, and interpreting what you learn.

There are a few puzzles too, one of which involves leaving the ship. This section is brilliantly atmospheric, silent except for the rhythmic sound of your breathing, recalling 2001: A Space Odyssey—a film whose presence is felt throughout *Event[0]*. The lonely, isolated atmosphere is one of the game's greatest strengths, and I love how small the looming bulk of Jupiter makes you feel. The gas giant is a constant presence, often glimpsed through windows, that reinforces just how far away you are from home.

SHORT CIRCUIT

But just as I was really getting into it, and developing an interesting relationship with Kaizen, it was over. It's a much shorter game than I hoped it would be. There are multiple endings, and optional logs to read, but most people will get about two to three hours out of it. Short games are fine, but I felt like there was so much more to explore here, as if this was a proof of concept for something much greater.

This and Kaizen's hit-and-miss responses to the things I typed stopped me from really loving the game. But it's a unique experience and a great piece of smart, well-crafted sci-fi. If the team at Ocelot Society take their interaction system and transplant it into a longer, more ambitious game, they could have something incredible on their hands. As it stands, *Event[0]* is a cool indie curio with some great ideas that don't always hit the mark. ■

SHIP SHAPE *A tour of the Nautilus*



CREW LOUNGE

Listen to Kaizen playing the piano, watch classic movie Metropolis on the projector, and grab a snack.



AIRLOCK

You can get in and out of the ship here. Sometimes Kaizen will lock you out if you're mean to it, so be careful.



GARDEN

A serene, relaxing space filled with clues about the story. Kaizen will open the blinds if you ask it nicely.



OBSERVATION DECK

Recline in a comfy chair and watch the majesty of space roll by. Don't stare at the Sun, though.



CORRIDOR

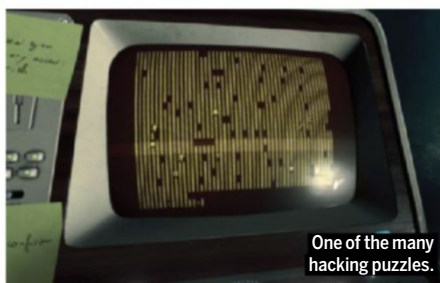
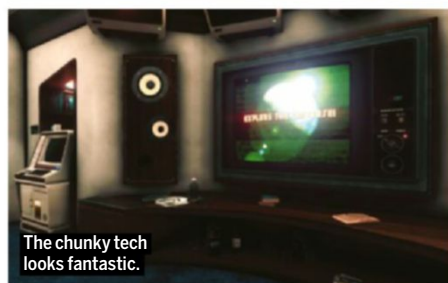
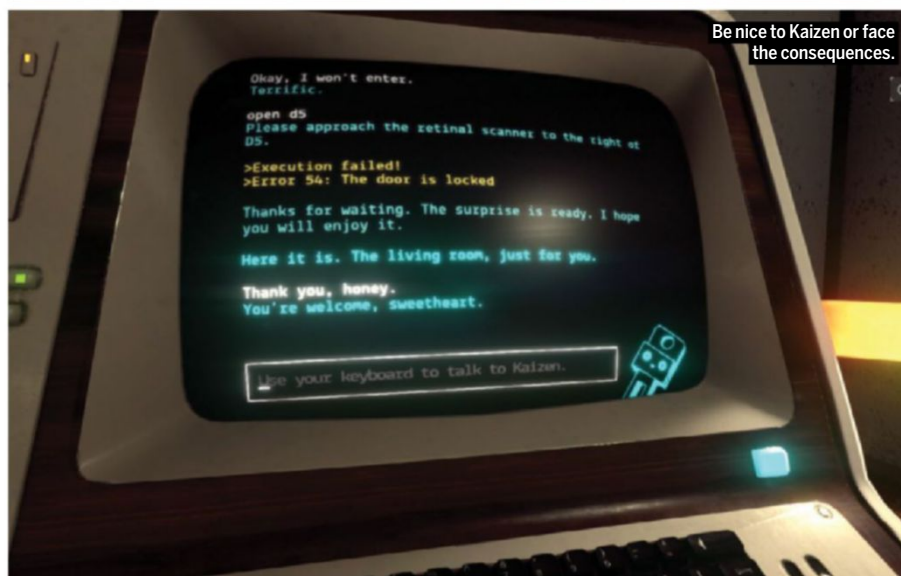
This is a sci-fi horror game, so of course it has a spooky corridor lit by flickering lights. It has to by law.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

An imaginative, atmospheric, and cleverly designed sci-fi adventure that's over far too quickly.

74



PARCHED

In **ReCore**, action platforming meets an empty desert world—
with disastrous results. *By James Davenport*

ReCore spreads action platforming across a barren desert planet, so it works about as well as tennis on a football field. It's the skeleton of a springy 3D platformer tragically undernourished by an empty open world and a narrative that plays out like Asimov Cliff Notes. But what if robots were sometimes bad? The world is Far Eden, and all the people are missing. You must team up with a robot dog and search for answers.

But first, you'll need some Prismatic Orbs, and before that, you'll need to level up, and before that, you'll need to find some security bots buried in the sand, and before that, you'll need to trek across an empty desert. *ReCore* is an infuriating cycle of checklists and chores, suffocating its best design beneath miles of bloat.

The classic 3D platforming part actually works well. Platforms float in the sky without a wink toward the fiction, score multipliers litter the screen during combat, and shiny resources explode out of robot monsters—walk over them and plink, plink, plinkplinkplink.

It's dated, but it feels good. The jump and dash physics is dependable and easy to gauge. It has to be: most of the platforming dungeons you load into from the overworld are focused and challenging, even if they're made of featureless level design building-blocks. They leave little question about where to go next, reducing the action to precise, urgent acrobatics. But there are only a handful of these sequences locked behind hours of boring collection quests.

Combat makes use of the same skills, and occurs in designated dungeon arenas and wherever there's sand—robots like to pop out of the ground without warning. Point the reticle near one and you can lock on for easy circle-strafting, a refreshing take on shooter design that shifts the challenge from a test of accuracy to

one of acrobatics and crowd management. These unfriendly robots fill the screen with projectiles that move just slowly enough for you to jump and dash around if you're capable.

You can sic your own robot pets on enemies, use charged shots on them, and extract their core once they're weak enough. Opponents appear in a variety of colors, and are only vulnerable to beams that match. *ReCore's* combat is good fun, but I grew tired of it over repeated treks across the same expanse of sand, as nice as it looks. A full suite of graphics options and smooth performance might allay concerns about the poor reputation of Universal Windows Apps so far, but pretty dirt is not enough to make a desert fun.

**Pretty dirt is
not enough to
make a
desert fun**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An action platformer set in a vast desert environment.

EXPECT TO PAY

\$40

DEVELOPER

Comcept, Armature Studio

PUBLISHER

Microsoft Studios

REVIEWED ON

Windows 10, i7-6700K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 980 Ti

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.recoregame.com

ReCore's action is good on its own, it's just completely diminished by an overworld that hides it away and chops it up with progress gates. The vast sandscapes work well in characterizing Far Eden as a young rimworld, but they're empty, with no vehicles and few fast travel checkpoints, forcing me to jam the dash button whenever I have to traverse long, barren stretches.

In one instance, I spent an hour scouring the desert for hidden security bots just to unlock a dungeon door, and once I got in and halfway through exploring it, I couldn't proceed because I wasn't a high enough level to defeat some enemies. They turned invincible as a result, and the only way to get more experience was to go back outside and shoot more robots. Why not lock the dungeon until I'm capable?

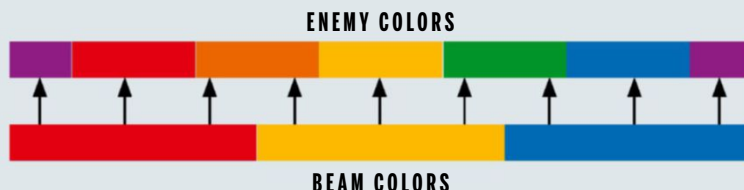
DOG GONE

Companions are another source of frustration. You can only bring two at a time, and each has a unique ability necessary for progression. I felt antagonized when I knew I had to dig up a Prismatic Orb (the collectible keys) using my dog bot, but because I left him back at home base, I had to teleport back (the only time you're allowed convenient travel), switch out my party, and then dash back to the dig spot.

And then there's the horrendous endgame. The final objective is strung out into several floors of platforming and combat challenges, with each floor gated by five Prismatic Orbs. It reduces *ReCore* to an even more monotonous grind that takes as long as the campaign does until that point. With such little consideration for players' time, you're better off spending it elsewhere. ■

TASE THE RAINBOW *A guide to beam color choice in combat*

Shoot the enemy with whatever beam color they're touching to maximize damage (and pass your Intro to Art exam).

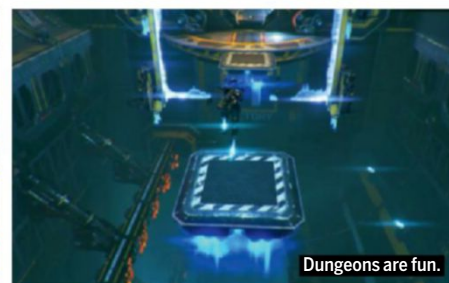
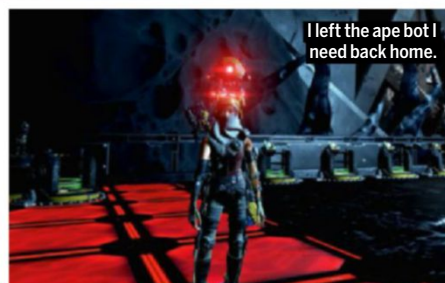
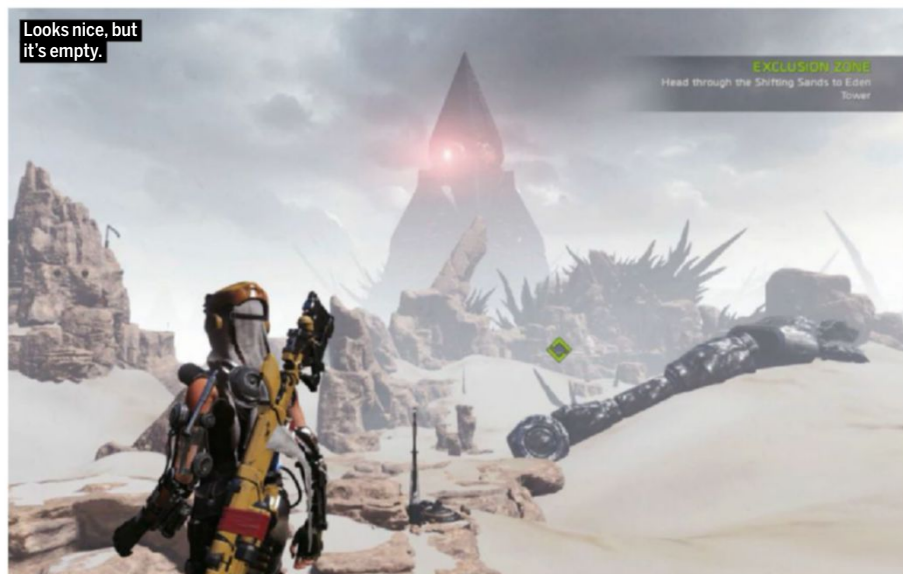


PC GAMER

VERDICT

ReCore buries a great action platformer beneath layers and layers of open-world busywork on a barren world.

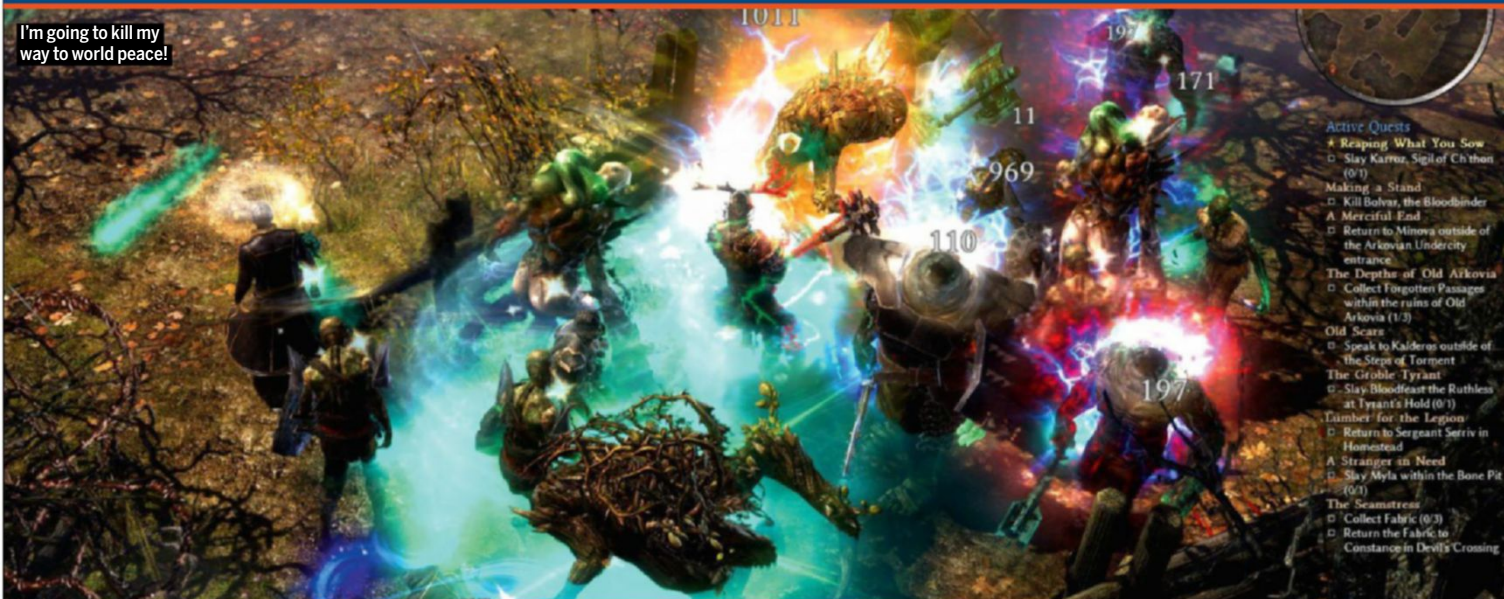
45



EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

I'm going to kill my way to world peace!



“What happens in the bowels of a forsaken fortress stays there, right?”

Daring to care about the denizens of **GRIM DAWN**

The concept of stranger danger does not exist in RPGs. I realize this halfway through a quest in the well-made action RPG *Grim Dawn*, at precisely the moment I teleport a child I've just met to a jail cell. Did I just do something bad?

That's not a question I ask myself often in action RPGs, in which you're required to kill creatures in their thousands. And the kid was hiding in the wild, surrounded by ghosts and other cool monsters that like to eat children. The jail cell is part of a reconstituted human settlement called Devil's Crossing, and the people there seem like good not-ghost people. I reckon I'm in the clear. This was an act of heroism, with a small aspect of child abduction.

Things get a little more complicated when I offer to take a man to Devil's Crossing and he refuses, and I kill him with a massive lightning hammer. It has

TOM SENIOR



THIS MONTH
Experienced tummy-feelings.
Are these emotions?

ALSO PLAYED
Everspace, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*

taken me a while to realize that this was a bad thing to do—an act of attempted heroism with a massive aspect of murder—but I had reacted instinctively to the fact the man's nametag turned red. I can't recall if he actually attempted to attack me, but after a decade of playing action RPGs the old monster-bashing instincts kicked in. I left-clicked and he turned into a heap of bloody chunks. Self-defense, your honor.

Still, what happens in the bowels of a forsaken fortress stays there, right? There is no morality system in *Grim Dawn*, only a faction system that

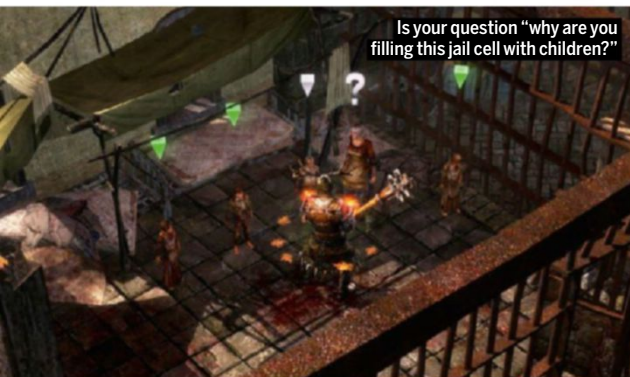
measures your reputation with the world's warring groups. The etherial ghost people hate me because I've killed them in their thousands. The citizens of Devil's Crossing think I'm OK, because I've filled their dungeons with children. It's a strange situation, but quite suited to *Grim Dawn*'s post-apocalyptic “Wild West with wizards” setting. There is no good and evil, there is only loot, and some portal-based people trafficking.

LOCAL HERO

My opinion of Devil's Crossing changes when I discover a larger and better-equipped town called Homestead. This place has walls, and proper soldiers, and



THE CITIZENS OF DEVIL'S CROSSING THINK I'M OK, BECAUSE I'VE FILLED THEIR DUNGEONS WITH CHILDREN



guard captains. I've spent hours helping the peasants of a tiny improvised refuge when I could have been leading them to a better place. I feel as though I could have teleported the kids to Homestead where they might have a chance of seeing daylight. I couldn't, of course, the game's carefully measured progression confined me to the fields around Devil's Crossing for the first six hours or so. Now when I talk to the kids they give me canned dialogue asking me whether I'll kill the bad men. I tell them yes. I don't tell them about the guy in the basement who wouldn't go with me that one time.

It's a credit to *Grim Dawn* that I care at all about any of them. Action RPG NPCs only have small text boxes with which to endear themselves to the player hovering 20 feet above. They're tiny helmeted quest-nodes to be mined for experience. But in *Grim Dawn* they seem like small people with small problems. They just want some supplies, and a new bridge, and maybe a blacksmith. Doing good deeds and seeing the settlement change before my eyes has awakened a nurturing instinct of sorts. Don't get me wrong, if their needs stop requiring me to kill thousands of monsters with a hammer, I'm out of here, but for now this strange symbiotic relationship continues. The people of Devil's Crossing shall have all the lost children they want. ■



“What does ‘Omega’ mean again?”

Failing to read people in **HUMAN REVOLUTION**

▶ SAMUEL ROBERTS



THIS MONTH
Suffered school-sports-related triggering events.

ALSO PLAYED
The Saboteur, *Hitman: Blood Money*

Replaying games as an adult with a full-time job is a fool's errand, but I've made the daft decision to try to finish *Human Revolution* again before I do *Mankind Divided*. How does it hold up? Well, I don't remember this many residents of Detroit looking like jacket potatoes, but here we are. I also forgot how well the 2011 game recaptured the excitement of problem-solving delivered by the original *Deus Ex*.

I'm halfway through the sidequest Lesser Evils, where Jensen has to help his colleague Carella, who's been stealing drugs from Sarif and passing them onto a guy called Tindall—who's now blackmailing Carella with footage of the whole ordeal. Tindall himself is having trouble with junkies coming into his home, looking for their fix. After knocking out a guy who was looking to kill Tindall while snooping his home, I confront the man himself outside.

It turns out Tindall's actually giving the stuff away, to help people who can't

afford it. But he won't hand over the USB stick containing the footage unless I do something for him first. I'm feeling lazy, so I decide to use Adam's sexy persuasion pheromones to get him to change his mind instead.

BETA BLOCKED

I'm trying to read Tindall's personality type, but it fluctuates a bit. I've also forgotten what the main differences are between the various kinds of people: alpha, beta, omega. I'm baffled. I remember what “alpha” means—that's the hypothetical captain of the water polo team. I hate that guy. And beta, he's the guy on the water polo team who holds the dorky kid's arms back, while the captain works the chest with multiple punches. What does “omega” mean again? Wasn't he a boss in *Final Fantasy*? Anyway, I guess Tindall's a beta and I get it wrong, so he refuses to hand over the footage. What a dick. He was probably captain of his water polo team at school.

Then I remember I'm playing *Deus Ex*. I punch Tindall in the face and take the footage, then shoot two witnesses nearby who reach for their guns. That got bloody, but jeez, it's just a USB stick. I admonish Carella for his behavior—which is perhaps somewhat inappropriate coming from a guy who just shot two guys dead and punched a philanthropic innocent in the face. ■



“I’m on the grid directly behind Rubens Barrichello. The actual one”

Racing a true professional in **iRACING**

The worst and most impossible thing has happened. My hands are actually sweating into my racing gloves. I know it's absurd to be this worked up over an online race, and to have to wear gloves while sitting at my computer. The thing is, I'm on the grid directly behind Rubens Barrichello. The actual one. The actual F1 driver Rubens Barrichello.

I feel pressure in every *iRacing* race as it is. It's a serious business where realism, clean racing and respect are key. Now I'm going to be battling someone everyone is excited to have on the server. It cannot be me who crashes into him. It must not.

“Oh great I'm behind Rubens. I'm not worried at all,” I drop into chat.

“Haha good luck” he replies. I'm instantly star struck, not so much dazzled by his celebrity status but rather by the amount of genuine respect I have for him. Rubens' F1 career spanned nearly 20 years. He's raced with the absolute best in actual motorsport and here we are on the grid. A racing legend, 18 other *iRacers*, and me sweating buckets into a pair of \$10 mountain biking gloves—all waiting for the signal to go.

We're racing Formula Renault cars at Mosport. It's a track I love and the cars

▶ CRAIG LAGER



THIS MONTH
Raced a real racing driver in pretend cars.

ALSO PLAYED
Rimworld, Hitman, F1 2016

suit it well. They have characteristics of Formula One cars—single seat, big aerodynamic features, open wheel—but operate at a much lower speed.

The lights are red. Engines rev up. A final “good luck all” comes over the chat. Lights out—away we go.

“The race can't be won in the first corner, but it can be lost”. Sage advice that I try to remember as everyone plows towards the fast and aggressive turn one. We enter it side by side: me on the left, Rubens on the right. It's too dangerous. I edge away, open a gap between us—immediately some hothead wedges himself in. All three of us side by side for the run to turn two. We're seven seconds in.

This race is going to last roughly half an hour. On lap one the tires are cold, the brakes are cold, there are cars everywhere. Better to back off now and live to fight later in the race than risk it all now. I tail Rubens and Hothead. We fly downhill through turn two and I try to calm my buzzing nerves for the laps to come. They say Formula One drivers sweat 3kg a race—in this department at least, I am their equal.

NOT LIKE THIS

Eventually I throw the car into turn eight, approaching the start finish line for lap two, and then... cue the marshals... The car in front has gone in too hard. His tail jerks right, then left. Smoke plumes from his tires as Hothead spins. He clips Barrichello, crunching them both into the barriers. I accelerate around the carcasses, picking up two places for the price of none.

As the checkered flag falls, I'm gutted. Technically I've beaten Rubens Barrichello: F1 driver, but it feels hollow. I didn't fight him for it, someone clumsily assassinated him. But, that's racing. It's par for the course in the real world. “To finish first you have to finish,” as the saying goes, and this time luck just wasn't on his side. I remain hopeful for a proper tussle another day. I'm coming for you, Rubens. ■

FORMULA ONE DRIVERS SWEAT 3KG A RACE—IN THIS DEPARTMENT AT LEAST, I AM THEIR EQUAL

“I’ve got ten seconds to grab it and get out. That’s... not a long time”

Practice makes for the perfect heist in **QUADRILATERAL COWBOY**

One thing you should know about me is that I’m a flapper. A panic merchant. Under severe pressure, I get all of a dither. So a mission like *Un Momento*, *Quadrilateral Cowboy*’s third proper heist after the train-robbing tutorial, should not be my cup of tea. And yet it’s the one heist I’ve replayed umpteen times, desperate to properly master it.

Part of its appeal is that it’s short. It flies in the face of convention in that regard—it’s the third mission of three, and in most games that would mean something longer and more convoluted than the previous two. *Un Momento* is a challenge, but it adopts a very different approach—not just requiring a methodical process, but forcing you to act quickly at the same time. You need both a plan and the skill to act upon it while racing the clock.

The main problem here is the alarm, which will sound when any door or skylight is open longer than three seconds. I start on the roof, put down my bulky portable hacking deck by scrolling the mouse wheel down and left-clicking, and begin tapping away. I enter “skylight2.open(3)” in the command line, which will, predictably, open the second skylight for three seconds, enough for me to pass

CHRIS SCHILLING



THIS MONTH
Got gud at nicking things.

ALSO PLAYED
Virginia, Pac-Man Championship Edition 2

through. There are ramps down to the ground floor; on my first few attempts I take the safe route until I realize there’s no fall damage, so I can instantly plummet to the bottom.

GRATE ESCAPE

Here, at my feet, lies an air vent. If I open the grate, a powerful gust blows up through it, which I can ride back to the top floor, just below Skylight 2. Aha! An exit route! Ahead of me is Door number 9: out comes my deck, which I rest on a nearby shelf. I type “door9.open(3)”, pick up my deck, and I’m in. At the end of a corridor is an anti-electrostatic field, behind which lies the target of my mission. My briefing says it’s “a

showroom prototype”; I think it looks like a weird robot.

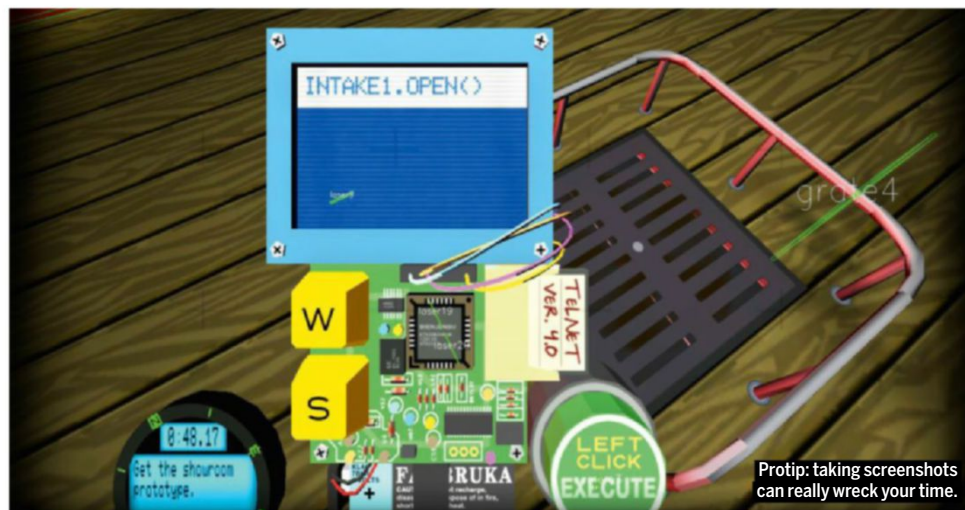
Either way, it’s resting on a pressure-sensitive floorpad. If I remove the prototype, I’ve got ten seconds to get out before security measures are triggered. That’s... not a long time. Especially when you’re a flapper.

The air vent is the key, clearly. But I need to grab the prototype, re-open Door 9, ride the air flow, open Skylight 2 and clamber out. I think the command line that eventually cracked it went something like this: “wait(4); door9.open(3); wait(2); skylight2.open(3)”. Figuring that out wasn’t too hard. Acting upon that plan? Another matter entirely. You see, left-clicking after the command line automatically picks up the deck. Tap Enter after typing the command and it starts the process, but you’ll then need to right-click to tuck your rig under your arm. Fruitful flapping ground.

Maybe a dozen failed attempts follow. On one, I forget to pick up the deck. On another, I forget to open the vent. On a third, I reach the top, watch the skylight open and forget how to jump. Finally, I make it. One minute 26 seconds. In and out like a master thief. I exhale deeply, flushed with a mixture of exhilaration and relief.

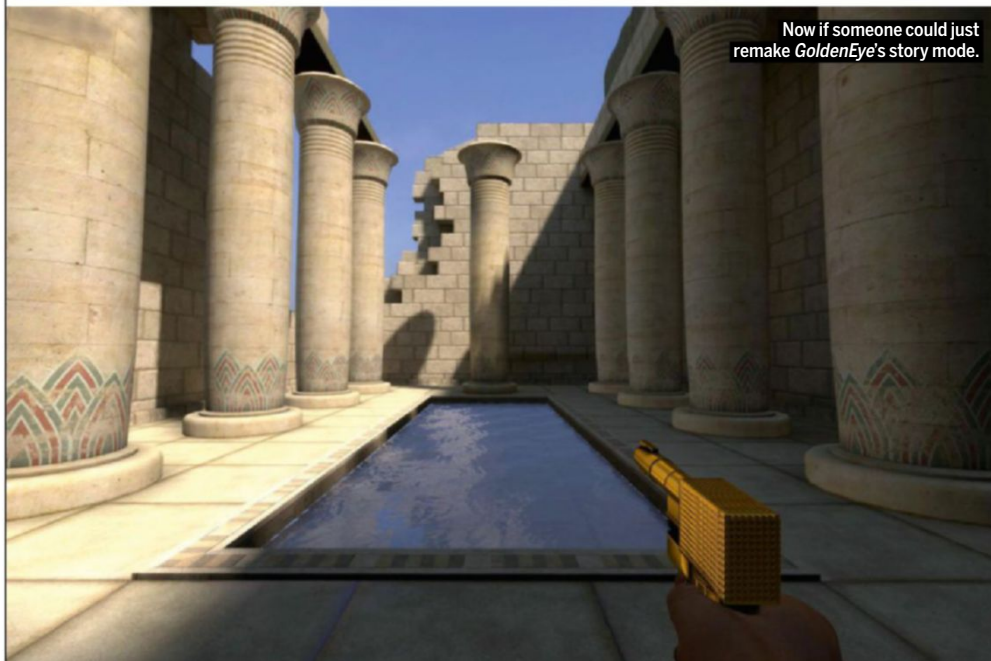
But hang on. I’m sure I can shave another 15 seconds off that. ■

FIGURING IT OUT WASN’T TOO HARD. ACTING UPON THAT PLAN? ANOTHER MATTER ENTIRELY



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Now if someone could just remake *GoldenEye*'s story mode.

1 GOLDENEYE: SOURCE

MOD A decade later, the mod hits version 5.0

If you're looking for the authentic *GoldenEye* experience, complete with fiddly controls, fuzzy textures, and Sean Bean's mesmerizing digitized face, the original is still available from most parents' attics, and in certain trendy bars throughout the land. This Source mod does the other thing: it reinvents the game for the modern era, whacking in support for far more players, along with sharper textures and a smoother framerate, while maintaining the spirit of Rare's enduring first-person Bond-'em-up.

In development for over ten years, *GoldenEye: Source* was recently updated with new maps, weapons, models and game mechanics, bringing it up to version 5.0. While it focuses purely on the multiplayer side of things, a few environments from the original's

story mode have been recreated as deathmatch levels, including the iconic Dam area that Brosnan flings himself from in the film. You might recall Dam as a particularly linear environment, but it's been remade here with a completely new sewer section, enabling additional opportunities to surprise your rivals with a deadly karate chop.

Remade guns, reworked levels, and better character models are all par for the course with mod updates, but there a few new wrinkles to the game code that will bring *GoldenEye: Source* more in line with, well, *GoldenEye*. The original's strafing system had a quirk (OK probably a bug) that caused players to move 40% faster when diagonally strafing, and that's finally been reproduced here. The soul of a game is a hard thing to replicate, but the *GoldenEye: Source* team are getting closer with every update.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/GoldenEyeSource

2

PLANET COASTER

MODS Scream if you want to mod faster

Frontier's theme park sim was recently introduced to the Steam Workshop, which can mean only one thing: copyright-ignoring novelty mods, and lots of them. In the brief time the alpha version of *Planet Coaster* has been available, fans have already made some impressive structures based on iconic locations.



HOGWARTS

A sizeable, detailed park based on both the castle from Harry Potter, and the picturesque town of Hogsmeade by its side. It's a magical place, if lacking in witches, wizardry and actual magic.

www.bit.ly/Coaster1



HOBBIT HOLE

There's only one building here, but what a building: Bilbo Baggins' rustic home from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Recreate Peter Jackson's films by spending six hours staring at the thing.

www.bit.ly/Coaster2



MUNSTER'S MANSION

Admit it, you have the theme tune in your head right now. This spooky mansion would look great in a Halloween-themed amusement park. Vampires, werewolves and zombies sold separately.

www.bit.ly/Coaster3

3 THE HOUSE ABANDON

FREEWARE Warning: house may not be abandoned

Thankfully, you don't have to rewind the tape and wait ten minutes.

By now you will have seen *Stranger Things*, and you'll likely have strong opinions about its nostalgic blend of horror, science fiction and Winona Ryder. *The House Abandon* evokes a similar feeling, with its flickering VHS aesthetic, chunky CRT TV and synthy soundtrack. This is, however, an old-fashioned text adventure.

That adventure is notable for how it bleeds into the real world. Basically, the game part is contained within that CRT TV, while the rest of the screen houses a desk, a retro computer, a clock radio and other items. It's set decoration—or at least, it appears that way—but soon becomes essential to the atmosphere.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/HouseAbandon

4 MANDAGON

FREEWARE Metroidvania in a beautiful environment

Mandagon is a game inspired by Tibetan philosophy and architecture, meaning it's a sidescrolling Metroidvania starring a sentient cube of rock. To be fair, it's a rather beautiful Metroidvania, its frosty pillars, weed-choked stone blocks and fluttering flags doing much to suck you into its frozen, lonely world. The serene, somber soundscape helps a lot with that as well.

The minimalist story has something to do with death, limbo and sacrifice,

themes that manifest through the time-honored tradition of collecting tablets scattered non-linearly around an open world. You ascend rickety wooden lifts, you ride whooshing water streams, you even fly, after gaining a bit of help. There's no real challenge to finding those stone tablets, although some of the platforming can be a little finicky.

This isn't the best Metroidvania on Steam, but it is a short and calming one.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Mandagon



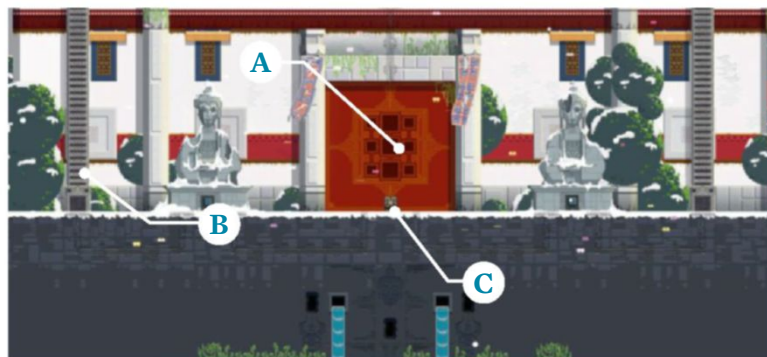
5 STRANGER THINGS

FREEWARE People are strange, tum-te-tum-tum-te

Infamous Quests is more famous for its old-fashioned adventure games in the Sierra style, but its take on *Stranger Things* is more reminiscent of Sierra's arch-rival, LucasArts. It's a single-screen game that recreates one scene from the hit Netflix series, putting the player in the role of fist-flinging police chief Jim Hopper. Investigating the disappearance of a local boy, you have to talk to a few NPCs and, well, that's basically it, but this brief game absolutely nails the atmosphere of the show.

Before the release of this freebie, Infamous declared that, thanks to poor sales, its next game would likely be its last. So if you enjoy this, check out the developer's back-catalog.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/StrangerGame



AT THROUGH THE KEYHOLE
You need to find and activate a bunch of tablets to finish the game, tablets that will unlock this massive, mysterious door.

BLIFT ME UP
These lifts need to be powered up before you can ride them. Luckily, they're connected by telltale marks to nearby switches.

CYOU
This cheeky little chap is you. Your hobbies include exploring ruined temples, disturbing birds, and ruminating on existence.

6 VAULT 1080

MOD Investigate Nvidia's creepily hi-res church

Nvidia is getting into the modding game with this *Fallout 4* add-on created to show off a bunch of fancy visual effects. The mod provides a new quest line and vault, and if you're familiar with the lore of *Fallout*, you'll know all about the freaky experiments Vault-Tec used to perform on Vault Dwellers. This time, however, the company has tinkered with the fabric of

reality, adding impressive but (overdone) volumetric lighting effects to blind you at pretty much every turn. They've also improved the shadows and textures.

The result is akin to JJ Abrams' misuse of lens flare in the *Star Trek* reboots, but there's a professional enough, spooky enough quest here once your eyes adjust to the light.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/1080Mod

Pah, that title's wholly inconsistent with the Vault-Tec numbering scheme.



7 CHAMPIONS OF ANTERIA

DEMO Will you Settle for this?

Remember *The Settlers: Kingdoms of Anteria*? Ubisoft Blue Byte's city-building spin-off seemed to be drifting quite far from the roots of *The Settlers* series, so it wasn't too surprising to see it reborn as *Champions of Anteria*, which downplays the city-building while adding light strategy and heavy monster-stabbing. Here's a generous two-hour demo so you can see if that genre pie chart is to your liking.

After assembling a team of heroes plucked from Blizzard's reject pile, you're asked to rebuild a chunky fantasy world by placing and upgrading buildings. Occasionally you'll have to hop into the world to do odd jobs, and slay monsters, as if you didn't have anything better to do.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Anteria



8 CODE NAME HUNK

MOD Almost a mod sandwich

The *Doom 2* engine has been used to make basically everything, from simple palette swaps to 3D platformers—there's even an autobiography in the works. *Code Name Hunk* is one of the most impressive mods yet, bending id's traditionally fast-paced engine to accommodate the slower survival horror of *Resident Evil 2*. The result is a third-person affair starring fan favorite side-character Hunk.

As in *Resi*, you'll need to find herbs, keys, and solve simple puzzles, and

when the time comes to blast zombies and lickers into tiny bits, you'll have to ready your weapon and fire carefully over Hunk's shoulder.

Did I say Hunk? I meant Krauser, as there's a secondary campaign that has you playing as the *Resident Evil 4* villain, who here wields a crossbow and a deadly mutant arm. While *Code Name Hunk* is still only in the demo stages, it's already fully featured, complete with its own tutorial pdf, and there are more stages to come.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/ResiDoom



9 NO MAN'S SKY

MODS The sky isn't the limit after all

No Man's Sky's remaining player will be thrilled with the tweaks modders have been making to the ambitious sci-fi game since its release. In addition to small-but-essential quality-of-life changes to the laborious interface, they've found ways to remove the incessant demand for minerals, and to tone down the constant chattering of your onboard computer system. They've also added a toggle for the HUD, so you can appreciate the

procedural environments without all those ugly icons cluttering up the screen.

Niggles aside, one of my biggest problems with the game is just how tame most planets feel, offering no real sense of scale or wonder as you explore dozens of eerily similar worlds. The *BigThings* mod—available from nomansskymods.com—implements that scale, increasing the size of trees, rocks, mushrooms and so forth, so that the player feels smaller and more insignificant, and planets feel pleasingly denser with life.

SKY SCRAPERS

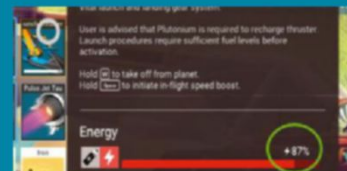
Three mods clawing at the limits of the base game



1 LOWFLIGHT

You can't fly close to the ground in *No Man's Sky*. This mod undoes that, letting you scrape the ground, fly under archways, and even underwater.

www.bit.ly/NoMans1



2 REDUCED LAUNCH COST

Launching your ship requires so much plutonium that it makes you not want to bother landing in the first place, so hooray for this add-on that lowers the cost.

www.bit.ly/NoMans2



3 FAST ACTIONS

The few seconds' wait between holding the interact button, and the game recognising it, gets annoying fast. So here's a mod that restores valuable minutes of your life.

www.bit.ly/NoMans3

10



BLUDGEONS & KRAKENS

FREEWARE It's no looker, but it's a kraken good RPG

It's not particularly pretty, but here's a big RPG set in a reassuringly familiar fantasy world. After

crafting a character from a standard pool of paladins, fighters, wizards and rogues, you're deposited in a medieval piracy realm that has its tongue firmly in its cheek. There's masses to see, do and kill for XP, and while it lacks *Ultima's* ambition, or *Final Fantasy's*

artistic prowess, this is a detailed throwback that's more fun to play today than either of those games.

Bludgeons retains old-fashioned quirks like the use of keyboard shortcuts to interact and access menus, but there are concessions to modernity, including a bigger resolution and even a minimap.

DOWNLOAD AT www.bit.ly/Bludgeons

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

The free updates for DICE's shooter should satisfy even the greediest Hutt. *By Rick Lane*

Star Wars *Battlefront* may have been a visual feast when it launched last year, but in terms of what it offered, it leaned more toward famine. All the laser-fire, AT-ATs, and luscious Endorian foliage in the galaxy couldn't hide the fact that *Battlefront* was shallower than Porkins' backstory. It was the combination of a small map cycle, samey game modes, and weapons so simplistic even a stormtrooper could hit a bullseye.

Not that this dented its appeal much. With 14 million copies sold thus far, *Battlefront* has proved an enormous success for EA and DICE, so much so they could easily have washed their hands of the game. Instead, DICE has updated *Battlefront* continually over the last ten months, tweaking modes, rebalancing weapons, and adding a substantial amount of free and paid-for content. Although it may still

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Out now	DEVELOPER DICE
PUBLISHER Blizzard	LINK starwars.ea.com

HIRE A HERO

A rundown of the new hero characters



LANDO

Pros: Fortune Trigger raises critical hit chance. System Disruption overheats enemy guns. Can lay down a Shocking Trap.
Cons: Lengthy cooldown on System Disruption. Small chance of betrayal.



CHEWBACCA

Pros: Fires barrage of explosive bolts via a combination of bowcaster skills. Inspires allies with mighty roar, pummels foes with ground slam. Surprising sense of comic timing.
Cons: Slow on his feet. Hairballs.



BOSSK

Pros: Regenerates health for each enemy killed. Can enhance damage and speed at will. Thermal vision.
Cons: Can't distinguish rebels or stormtroopers in thermal vision. Can crack a mirror just by looking at it.

prove too simple for the *Battlefield* brigade, there's no question that the game is significantly improved over the release version.

Away from the season pass, which includes maps themed around Jabba's Palace, Cloud City, and the Death Star, DICE has added three other free maps focused on its larger-scale modes, such as the splendid Walker Assault. Of these, by far the best is Graveyard of Giants, the Jakku-themed map. Graveyard sets the action amid the scattered wreckage of Star Destroyers and other spacecraft while a massive battle rages in the skies. As you dart and weave across the debris-strewn sand, taking cover behind the feet of fallen AT-ATs, you can see damaged ships billowing smoke as they plummet. There's even a moment when a Super Star Destroyer crashes into the horizon, exploding like an atomic bomb. It's stunning stuff.

Graveyard of Giants comes with a new mode, Turning Point, a spin on *Battlefield*'s excellent Rush mode that lets the Rebellion take the fight to the Empire. Unlike Rush, the rebels only need capture one of two control points to push the Imperials back to the next defensive line. This means rebel players can employ bait and switch tactics to gain the upper hand, concentrating fire on one point while sneaking a smaller force to capture the second. For the Imperials, this is a tense and frenetic mode, where they must coordinate their defense and retreat from intense orbital bombardments whenever the rebels capture a point. It offers that little bit of nuance that *Battlefront* is lacking elsewhere, and can be played on the other 40 player maps to boot.

The other two maps are spins on already-existing environments. Of these, Twilight on Hoth is easily superior, a frigid night map where players battle through a valley during a freezing snowstorm before descending a glistening crevasse for fierce close-quarters fighting. No map showcases *Battlefront*'s fireworks better than Hoth's laser-pocked dusk.

Survivors of Endor is set just after the destruction of the second Death Star. Sounds neat, but it's basically the original Endor map redecorated.

DICE has also expanded the singleplayer and co-op sides with new survival maps: the self-explanatory Ice Caves, and a Tatooine map set in Mos Eisley spaceport (with bonus Millennium Falcon action). But the bigger addition is Skirmish mode, where you can play Walker Assault or Fighter Squadron on your lonesome or with a pal.

A NEW HOPE

All these additions help to make *Battlefront* a more rounded game, but it's the smaller tweaks that make the largest difference to how it plays. One of the most obvious is that it's now



A SUPER STAR DESTROYER CRASHES INTO THE HORIZON, EXPLODING LIKE AN ATOMIC BOMB

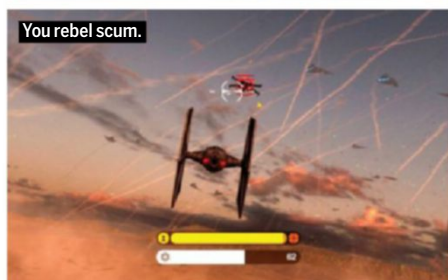
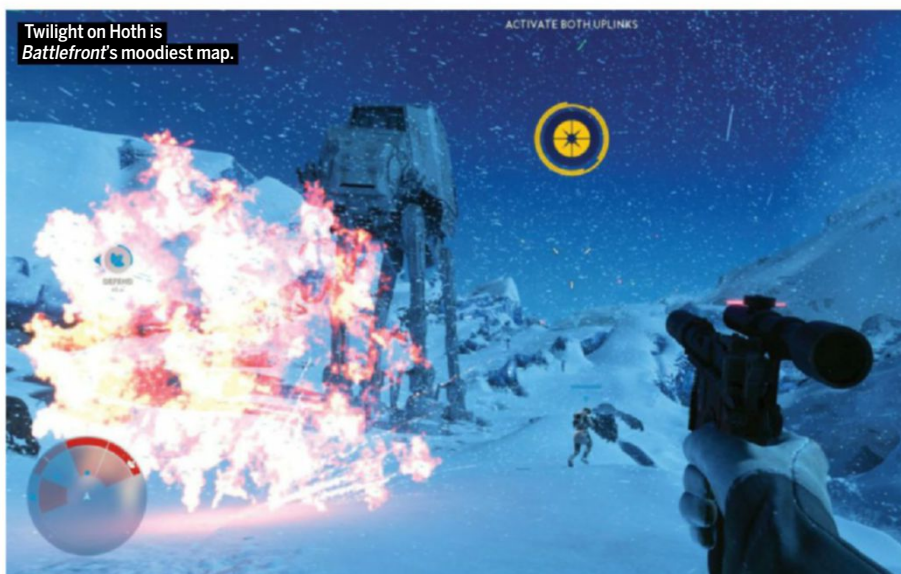
actually possible to control airborne vehicles with a keyboard and mouse. There's also a much greater distinction between weapons, thanks to much fiddling with damage, rates of fire, and reload cooldowns.

The original maps and modes feel better balanced too, although Supremacy is still dominated by attrition over chokepoints. And while Survival is still a fun distraction, the singleplayer missions don't exactly inspire, and the smaller multiplayer modes, deprived of *Battlefront*'s talent for spectacle, still lack depth.

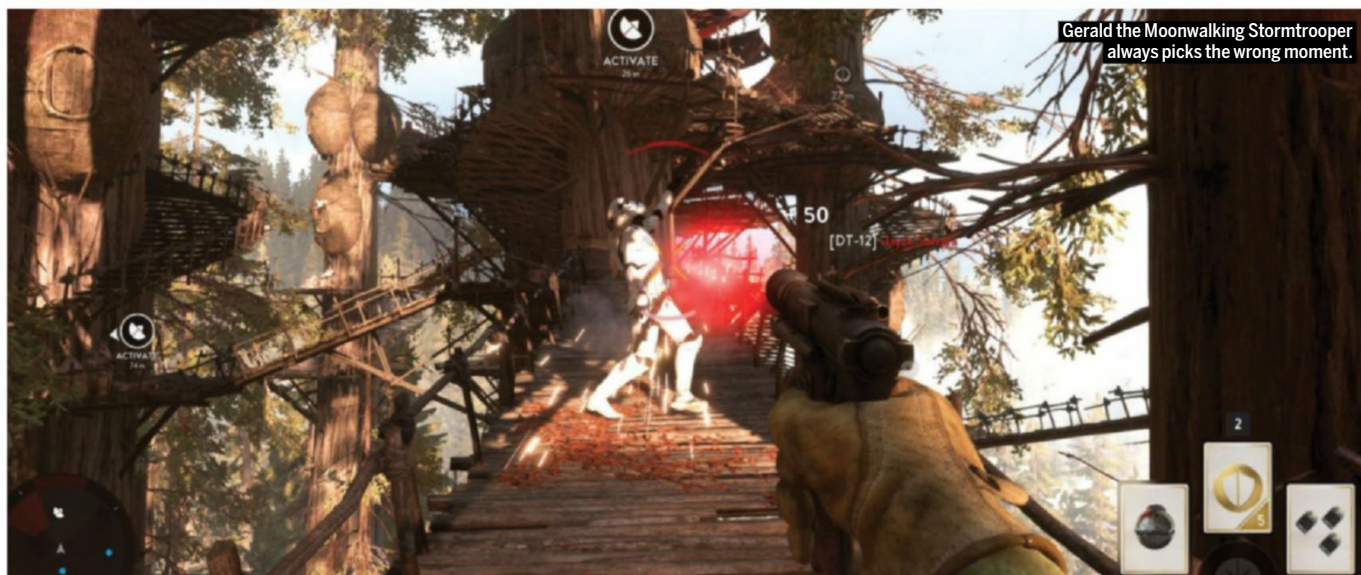
This still isn't a game to play if you fancy using more than half your brain, and it never will be. But what you feel beneath your fingers is now closer to what you see and hear on screen. This, coupled with more ways to experience those spectacular large-scale battles, make it worth a second look even without shelling out for the season pass. ■



Twilight on Hoth is *Battlefront's* moodiest map.



You rebel scum.



Gerald the Moonwalking Stormtrooper always picks the wrong moment.



The darkness really shows off *Battlefront's* laser effects.



Ice caves: better than regular caves. Not as good as the Bat cave.

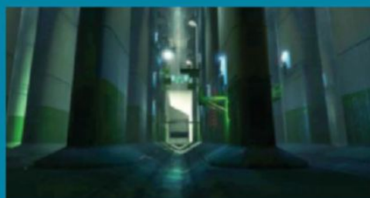


Survivors of Endor is a half-hearted reskin of the Endor map.



THE JACKNIFE LEVEL IN MIRROR'S EDGE

It's worth being angry to appreciate the game's standout chapter. *By Lorna Reid*



RIGHT: The green color scheme lends a subterranean feel to the storm drain stretches.



There's something about trying to wrestle a monitor from your desk with the express intention of hurling it out of a window, only to find said window has long been painted shut, that really makes you stop and think: what am I doing? *Mirror's Edge* inspires many such moments. But in among them, there's something else. Something special that keeps you from drowning this game in acid.

In a game of (often literal) highs and lows, Jackknife, *Mirror's Edge's* second chapter and its longest, remains a flawed gem for me. It has made me angrier than any level bar the last, but when I sit back and regard the game in its entirety, it's always Jackknife that I come back to as the standout.

While a good slice of the action of this game takes place on rooftops, Jackknife offers a blistering run through some truly memorable alternate locations. From the streets and the depths of the storm drains back up to the heights again, diversity is shovelled at you like coal into a fire.

I think that's what appeals to me the most. As beautiful as the rooftops are, some breathing room is always a good thing. And what better way to contrast the sharp, primary look of the roofs and pristine offices than going down to the streets and underworld. Alleyways and cement trenches lead to grimy maintenance rooms, there's a brief taste of the clean outside world, then you plunge into the maw of the storm drains.

The chore of getting down there while a helicopter vomits bullets at you is infuriating when you're

MIRROR IMAGES *Other frustrating but memorable locations*



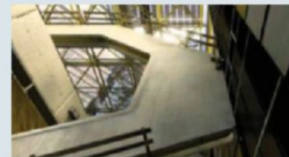
THE TRAIN

Not content with having you run and leap between buildings, in chapter four the game expects you to drop onto and ride a train. Just hope your runner insurance hasn't expired.



THE BOAT

Working through the warren of tiresome doors, armed guards, and suffocating rooms is bad enough, but have fun dodging the sniper on the upper deck before your scuffle.



THE ATRIUM

This mess of scaffolding and walkways is enough to twist your mind, let alone your patience. Navigating this sadistic vertical sprawl is a rage-inducing time sink.

exploring and pathfinding for the first time. If you're masochistic enough to be speed-running the level it's ten times worse.

THE DEPTHS

At first I was appalled at where I found myself. What the hell am I supposed to do here? Where are the rooftops? Where are the brilliant dashes of color against the sea of white? What have they done? I despised it. I hated struggling to navigate the perilous gantries of the imposing underground chamber, with its glistening columns stretching to infinity, let alone avoiding the snipers on the upper levels.

Struggling and feeling lost here feeds your resentment. But then, slowly, as muscle memory developed and my pathfinding improved, I started to appreciate the location. Despite it being such a dank, lonely place, in which you're made to feel so small, I began to enjoy the little touches. The lighting, the water, the squeaking of my shoes as I wall-ran and short-cutted, and occasionally managed to double-jump beams.

Gliding down a slope in a sheet of water cast in a Halloween green was one moment that became a favorite. Right up until I realized I'd have to scramble back out of another drain, amid platforms and pipes. And then, bliss, I was back up to the rooftops

with their jumble of air-con units and architectural bric-a-brac.

It isn't just the paying out of such contrasting places that stands out. It's the pace. Had I the chance to indulge my usual gaming habits and lollygag, meander, and generally faff about, the level may well have lost some of its charm. But taken as it is, at near breakneck pace, it transcends the string of locations to become a fluid, urgent tour, doused in panic.

The level practically drags you along before suddenly thrusting you into the role of pursuer as you set off across the rooftops after the titular Jackknife. This switch from hunted to hunter is masterful and exhilarating, used again later in the boat chapter, but to lesser effect.

The more I examined this chapter, and the more I allowed myself to become immersed (largely through self-imposed repetition) the more the negativity fell away, leaving only a deep appreciation and respect for the level design. A design that undulates beautifully through changing locales, playing with pace and testing your abilities at every turn.

Like the game itself, Jackknife isn't for everyone, and it will stretch your patience to breaking point, especially with the numerous glitches. But love it or loathe it, it remains the most memorable chapter in a flawed but brilliant and original game. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
January, 2009

EXPECT TO PAY
\$20

OUR REVIEW
83%

LINK
www.mirrorsedge.com



LEFT: After a rooftop chase, you finally catch up with your edgily-titled quarry.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



“Replacing NYC with sunshine and palm trees was a brave move”



MAX PAYNE 3

A quest for vengeance in Brazil. *By Andy Kelly*

Of the three *Max Payne* games released so far, *Max Payne 3* is the odd one out. But that's only because Remedy is so good at imprinting its games with its own idiosyncratic personality. The third game may share a lot of the same DNA, and may also feature a metaphor-loving ex-cop killing gangsters in slow-motion, but it's a very different experience. Over the years I've developed a greater appreciation for the risks Rockstar took in breaking Remedy's established, and beloved, mold.

It's a Rockstar game through and through, with lavish production values, gorgeous world-building, and confident, cinematic direction. Max is still depressed, still haunted by the

death of his family, and still self-medicating with painkillers and booze. But after a deadly run-in with the hot-headed son of a local mob boss, he leaves the mean streets of New York behind and moves to São Paulo—the largest city in Brazil—to work as private security for the wealthy Branco family. It's a bold change of scenery.

The dark, snowbound streets of New York and New Jersey are a big part of *Max Payne*'s visual identity. And although there are a few flashback chapters in *Max Payne 3* that take us back there, replacing that

iconic setting with Brazil's sunshine and palm trees was a brave move. The first two games are set entirely at night, while much of this game takes place during the day, giving it a very different atmosphere. São Paulo is as rough, violent, and run-down as New York in places—particularly the Nova Esperança favela—but the overall tone is much less gloomy.

FISH OUT OF WATER

It's a radical departure, but it works. It's always interesting to see a familiar character thrust into an unfamiliar situation, and Max is hilariously out of place in Brazil. As if being a white American in a favela didn't draw enough unwanted attention, he makes his life even more difficult by wearing the loudest Hawaiian shirt imaginable. He was comfortable in New York, but here he's an outsider, and the game plays up to it brilliantly. "Here I was," he grumbles in one of his monologues. "Some hopped-up gringo a long way from home, causing trouble the only way I know how."

That way, of course, being balletic slow-motion combat. *Max Payne 3* is an incredibly simple, pared-down shooter. All you can do is jump and

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
May 2012

DEVELOPER
Rockstar Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

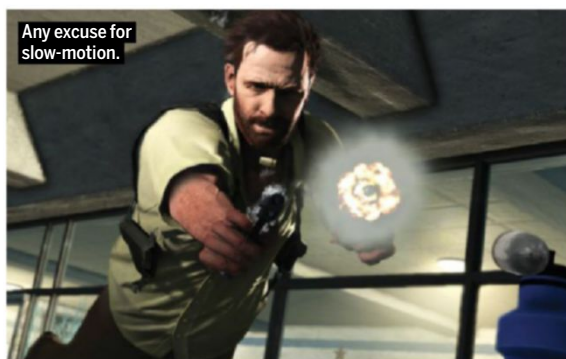
LINK
www.maxpayne3.com



In flashbacks you play as a more familiar Max.



Two guns are better than one.



Any excuse for slow-motion.

✖ shoot, using bullet-time to slow the action down for a limited period. Kill the last guy in a group and the camera will zoom-in on his bloody, bullet-peppered body, and you can keep firing you if like, you sicko. It's an extremely limited toolset for a ten-hour game, but the good variety of locations and situations manages to keep things varied and interesting.

LEVEL HEADED

Highlights include a rooftop nightclub where throbbing music and

flashing lights provide an intense backdrop for a firefight. Nova Esperança is a narrow, twisting meat-grinder with gunmen emerging suddenly from blind spots and firing at you from rooftops. And the airport is host to a series of brilliantly frenetic, challenging battles with a small army of heavily-armed, and heavily-armored, corrupt cops. The set-pieces are all wonderfully constructed and choreographed, but occasionally you do wish there was more variation and depth.



The pace is breakneck, and I love the way it transitions seamlessly between locations and times of day by artfully hiding the loading screens with stylish, hyperactive cutscenes. There are far too many of them, though. Approach a door and instead of just opening it yourself, a shaky, over-stylized cutscene will play showing Max opening it. It wrestles the controls away from you far too often, for stuff you could easily have done yourself.

Much of the game's power lies in its soundtrack. In a genius move, Rockstar hired Los Angeles noise-rock band Health to write the score. It's an unusual and inspired choice that sets the music apart from pretty much every other game. It's all pounding percussion, distorted, reverby guitars, and icy synths, and nothing else sounds like it. It's dynamic too, with musical elements fading in and out to mirror the action. I get goosebumps every time I play the airport level and "Tears" starts thundering on the soundtrack. More developers should recruit bands to compose their scores.

Flashback chapters give us a taste of what happened before. These are

WORD PLAY *Max loves a tortured metaphor*

"Here I was, about to execute him like some dime store angel of death."

"São Paulo was like Baghdad with G-strings."

"This town has more smoke and mirrors than a strip club dressing room."

"I stood out in this place like a streetwalker in a monastery."



IT'S GRIMLY SELF-SERIOUS, WITH NONE OF THE EARLIER GAMES' SENSE OF HUMOR

set in Hoboken, New Jersey, and the wintry streets stand in stark contrast to sun-soaked São Paulo. An altercation in a bar leads to Max and Passos, his contact in Brazil, being chased by an army of camel-coat-wearing wiseguy mobsters straight out of Goodfellas. Through the bullet trails of a rooftop gunfight you see the Manhattan skyline in the distance, lit up against the night sky, which is a wonderful moment of scene-setting. These visits to New Jersey are brief, but they feature some of the game's best shootouts.

One of the strongest pieces of connective tissue between *Max Payne 3* and its predecessors is the presence of James McCaffrey, who's been the voice of Max since the first game in 2001. His performance is a highlight, delivering the ex-cop's tortured metaphors and hard-boiled film noir monologues with a likeable weariness. And his face is even in

there too. In the first *Max Payne* it was Remedy's Sam Lake; in the sequel it was actor Timothy Gibbs; and in the third game it's McCaffrey. I'm glad Rockstar didn't recast, because I can't imagine anyone else playing Max.

MOODY BLUES

My biggest gripe with *Max Payne 3* is its lack of humor. Sam Lake's writing in the first two games is a lot more colorful and tongue-in-cheek—especially in the heavily self-referential second game. Rockstar's writers, however, play it much straighter, and there's nothing to compare to the surreal Address Unknown theme park or the absurd Dick Justice TV show. It's a pretty dry revenge story and, for the most part, grimly self-serious. The first two games also had an esoteric, mythical quality, with their references to Norse paganism, and there's none of that here either. Remedy's off-key quirkiness is a big part of *Max Payne*'s success, and I wish Rockstar had gone more in that direction.

That aside, *Max Payne 3* is a worthy, if overly earnest, sequel. I admire Rockstar for taking a chance

with a new setting, because while I'd love another *Max Payne* game set in New York City, it's been done twice before. It's a pretty basic third-person shooter, but one constructed with an enormous budget, keen attention to detail, a flair for the cinematic, and a lot of talent. And, honestly, it doesn't matter where in the world Max is. If he has a gun, a bottle of whisky, and a few dozen metaphors, he can do his thing anywhere, the only way he knows how. ■

UNINSTALL

It's just painful, according to Tom

"It ditches Remedy's tongue-in-cheek noir pastiche in favor of a try-hard gangster drama delivered through repetitive cutscenes. Only a few levels are any good, and the Panama Canal level that kills you for falling into the water is a crime. If you find a copy, dive slowly sideways while dropping it in a bin."



JOE DONNELLY



"What's your favorite type of game?" is a question I struggle with. I like all sorts of 'em. Serious, funny, short, long, whatever. Here's a few of particular note.

CHARACTER STUDIES



KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

www.kentuckyroutezero.com

➔ After a two-year wait, *KRZ*'s fourth act finally arrived earlier this year. With more characters and yet more conundrums, this particular fork in the road isn't as engaging as its forerunners—but that doesn't mean I can't wait to see where this tale is headed next. A simply brilliant narrative adventure.

HOLY HECK



STELLARIS

www.stellarisgame.com

➔ Paradox's games are known for their post-launch support and this space-flung 4X-meets-grand strategy affair is no different. With user-made mods, its first official expansion, not to mention the brilliant Alexis Kennedy providing guest writing some ways down the line, it just keeps getting better.

SPACE SANDBOXING



STARBOUND

www.playstarbound.com

➔ Described by some as "*Terraria* in space", *Starbound* is a lovely two-dimensional sandbox game in its own right, which is hugely entertaining and offers many hours of fun. The combat isn't as intuitive as its genre cousin, but it'll spoil you rotten with its huge arsenal of weapons nonetheless.

BEYOND SKYRIM



ENDERAL: THE SHARDS OF ORDER

www.sureai.net/games/enderal

➔ OK, so this is actually a *Skyrim* mod, but if you already own the fifth *Elder Scrolls* installment it's also free. Far from a simple rinse and repeat job, *Enderal* boasts a new story with new characters, new quests, new systems and a map almost identical in size to its source material.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Joe Donnelly

ON A SERIOUS NOTE



ACTUAL SUNLIGHT

www.actuallsunlight.com

➔ It was international Suicide Prevention Day last month, so I revisited this: a short, semi-autobiographical game exploring the oft-ignored subject with humility and insight. Although heavy at times, it's a great and thought-provoking example of games examining more serious and interpersonal themes.

SURVIVAL OF THE FORTUNATE



RIMWORLD

www.rimworldgame.com

➔ Although residing in Early Access, *RimWorld* is already a fantastic colony simulation game. It's also an excellent story generator where failure stalks your every turn. If illness doesn't get you, infestation might. If not pirates, expect death by severe weather. The fun lies in how long you can ride your luck.

NUCLEAR NASTIES



STALKER: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

www.stalker-game.com

➔ With Halloween around the corner, I recently returned to what I deem the best horror series ever made. These games could feature in many genres' "best of" lists, but *Shadow's* setting, premise and enemies are as scary as they come. I play it with the lights on during the day.

CONSOLE CONVERSION



THE LAST OF US

www.bit.ly/2bpbGqg

➔ What's this? A console game? Just this once. Sony's PlayStation Now subscription service is available on PC, which means you can stream PS3 games on your desktop (if your connection is fast enough). It comes with a seven-day free trial, so you can speed through this fine story-heavy zombie game for nothing.



The premier source for everything video games, TV, films, and more.



www.gamesradar.com

[UPGRADE]

GROUP TEST

By Ed Chester



SPEAKERS

Turn your PC into a high-quality multimedia center



With gaming headsets and high-end headphones all the rage, PC speakers are the forgotten child of the enthusiast PC market. Not today.

Spending just \$45 or so will get you a huge upgrade in quality and volume. Not that \$45 is as much as you can or should spend. I've compiled a selection of speakers that runs from under \$20 all the way up to \$900+. Whether you're after something basic for occasional use or you really want to make an impact, you'll find a speaker set here to suit you.

Q&A

How much bass do I need?

As much as you want. It's that simple. If you like how certain speakers sound, get the biggest sub you can and enjoy. However, as general rule, spending the same amount on speakers without a separate sub-woofer will get you better overall sound quality, so it comes down to what sort of music you like.

Do watts matter?

The wattage rating you'll see on speaker systems is only a very crude indication of how loud they can get. That's

because there are several other factors in play, such as speaker/driver efficiency. As a rough indicator, wattage can be useful, but pay attention to the RMS (root mean square) level and not the peak level.

Quantity or quality?

One of the biggest considerations is whether to go for less powerful but better quality speakers or all out power. Generally I'd opt for the former when it comes to games, but if you're looking for something that you can really crank up for parties—or just when you're doing a bit of housework—then you may want that extra oomph.

Dictionary

2.0, 2.1, 5.1....?

The number of speakers in a set. The first number tells you how many satellite speakers there are, the second how many sub-woofers. Soundbar speakers have several satellites in one bar and often have virtual surround sound.

Frequency response

The range of audio frequencies—measured in hertz (Hz)—the speaker set can reproduce. Somewhere around 50Hz to 20kHz is typical, but numbers outside that range deliver more.



BOWERS & WILKINS MM-1

www.bowers-wilkins.com **\$912**

By far the most expensive speakers in this round-up, the Bowers & Wilkins MM-1 are proper high-end hi-fi audio squeezed into desktop form. The question is, can they possibly justify the price? Short answer: yes.

1

Clearly you'll need deep pockets to even consider them, but if you're after a PC speaker set that delivers truly exceptional audio quality and looks fantastic too, there simply isn't anything better.

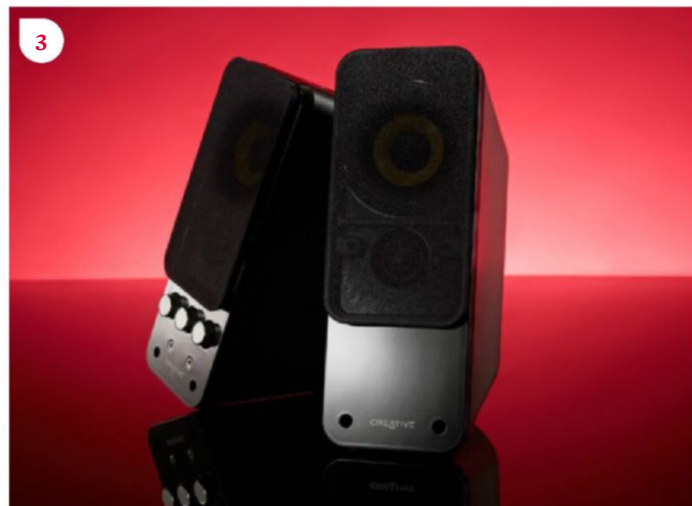
What's perhaps most striking is just how small they are considering their audiophile aspirations and high asking price: they're just under 17cm tall and 10cm square. Yet what perfectly formed speakers they are. Covered all round in speaker fabric broken only by an aluminium strip running round the middle and down the back, and an aluminium plate on top, they simply ooze class.

They sound classy too. Astonishingly deep and powerful bass is joined by a rich and detailed mid-range and a top-end that simply sparkles, plus they sound great at both high and low volumes, without the need to tweak any EQ. Add the lovely little wireless remote, headphone jack, 3.5mm jack input and a USB input that uses the MM-1's own high-quality DAC, and you have the perfect PC audio package.

90%



2



3

CREATIVE T3250

www.creative.com **\$45**

→ The Creative T3250 is a perfect 2.1-vs-2.0 counter to the company's own T20 speakers. Although a little cheaper, they're in the same ball park, and while the latter offers clarity and mid-range, the T3250 is all about that bass.

2

The impressively petite sub delivers just the sort of rumble that can bring explosions in games and films to life while also delivering the thud that certain genres of music require. You also get Bluetooth connectivity that's easily set up via the wired remote, which also houses the power and volume control and power indicator. It's a useful addition but so lightweight you'll need to stick it down to stop it being dragged around by its own cable.

This is clearly a fairly cheap 2.1 speaker set—in fact, it's more of a sub-\$40 set in terms of pure speaker quality. It's the Bluetooth that raises the price. As such the build quality is basic. It all feels a little flimsy and none of the cables are removable.

The overall sound quality is let down by a lack of clarity from the satellite speakers, there's a noticeable mid-range gap between the relatively weedy satellites and the sub-woofer, and you can't adjust bass level. All told, a perfectly adequate entry level 2.1 option, but one with definite limitations.

70%



4

CREATIVE GIGAWORKS T20 SERIES II

www.creative.com **\$110**

➔ The Creative T20 was something of a revelation when it arrived ten years ago. In a market dominated by big subs and satellite speakers galore, the T20 delivered quality over quantity without breaking the bank.

3

All these years later there's only been one revision of the T20, in the shape of the T20 Series II, and the set's impact hasn't lessened one bit.

The T20s just sound so damn good. It's the combination of detail and power with a sound that stretches from surprisingly low bass right the way through the mid-range and to the top-end. In contrast, many 2.1 speaker sets are missing that vital mid-range that brings guitar, piano and vocal-driven music to life.

The lack of a sub does mean you miss that bass thud, and compared to the more expensive 2.0 sets reviewed here the T20 does lack top-end detail. But for the price, it's fantastic.

It's stylish and well made too. Although all-plastic there's a heft and solidity to this speaker set. For features you get bass and treble dials and front-mounted headphone and aux inputs on the right speaker, along with the main input on its rear. So while the T20 is basic, it delivers where it counts.

88%

RAZER LEVIATHAN

www.razerone.com **\$198**

➔ "One soundbar to rule them all", declares Razer on the box of this review sample supplied by Overclockers. Razer does have a point—as you'd hope given the price. One area where the Leviathan doesn't immediately impress, though, is design.

4

The plain old plastic used throughout isn't particularly premium and the glossy plastic around the controls in the center of the soundbar actually looks a little cheap. Those controls could also do with some backlighting to tell the seven identically shaped buttons apart.

Otherwise this soundbar delivers. Its bass presence is huge—it's by far the most bombastic on test—and yet there's high-end detail and good mid-range warmth too. It can't match the MM-1 for overall finesse but it's not bad. The bass control is too fiddly, however.

You get plenty of features: Bluetooth with easy NFC setup, Dolby virtual surround, three sound modes (Gaming, Movie and Music), digital optical input and an analog 3.5mm jack. The virtual surround sound adds immersion to games and movies, although it doesn't quite bring the competitive advantage of true surround.

There's a lot to like. If Razer could tweak the design it would be perfect.

82%



LOGITECH Z533

www.logitech.com **\$65**

→ You would expect this to be a decent step up from the Logitech T3250, but actually it's surprising how much of a leap it is, for just a \$20 or so price difference. It's available in either black or white, and both versions look great.

5

The option of covers for the satellite speakers would have been nice, it's true. As for build quality, perhaps the two most notable improvements compared to the T3250 are that all the cables, bar the wired remote, are removable, making setup, adjustment and cable-replacement far more convenient. The remote itself is heftier too, so it stays firmly planted on your desk, and it has a lovely big control for turning the speakers on and adjusting volume. Plus it houses 3.5mm jacks for headphone and auxiliary input as well as a bass adjustment dial. The sizeable sub also has a 3.5mm jack input and a pair of RCA inputs.

As for sound quality, that sub doesn't disappoint—it can hit hard and loud. The satellites also offer a huge step up in high-end detail compared to the T3250, though there is still something of a mid-range gap. The Z533 is ideal for gaming, movies and hip-hop, but the Leviathan and premium 2.0 speakers are better for other types of music.

80%

LOGITECH Z150

www.logitech.com **\$18**

→ For the money—a very small amount of money—these speakers boast a massive 3W RMS output, one 3.5cm driver per speaker, a headphone jack, a secondary aux input jack and a combined volume/power control.

6

The latter three are all situated on the front of the right speaker while round the back is the main input—which sadly is a tethered cable rather than a proper jack socket—and the socket for the included mains power adapter. Some speakers at this price range are either passive or USB powered. The latter can be useful as it saves a mains plug socket, but then it uses up a USB socket. Which is more convenient will be down to you.

These small, all-plastic, speakers are reasonably well made, all things considered, and they look more stylish than you might expect.

What's more, they sound OK. They're reasonably clear and have far more power than any monitor or laptop speakers. They can't really stretch to kitchen-party duties but are plenty loud enough for daily desktop listening.

Doubling your outlay will gain you a big leap in volume and bass, but for a cheap-as-possible upgrade to monitor or laptop speakers the Z150s deliver.

80%



EDIFIER R1600T III

www.edifier.com **\$115 (import price)**

→ If Creative's T20 and T3250 bring the 2.0 vs 2.1 fight to the sub \$50 mark, it's the Edifier R1600T and Logitech Z533 that bring it to the sub \$120 level. And what a step up in quality that \$115 or so gets you.

7

On every level the R1600T is a noticeable upgrade from the T20, including size. Standing 26cm tall and with a 16 x 18cm footprint, these are proper bookshelf hi-fi speaker-sized units—they're easily double the size of the more expensive B&W MM-1.

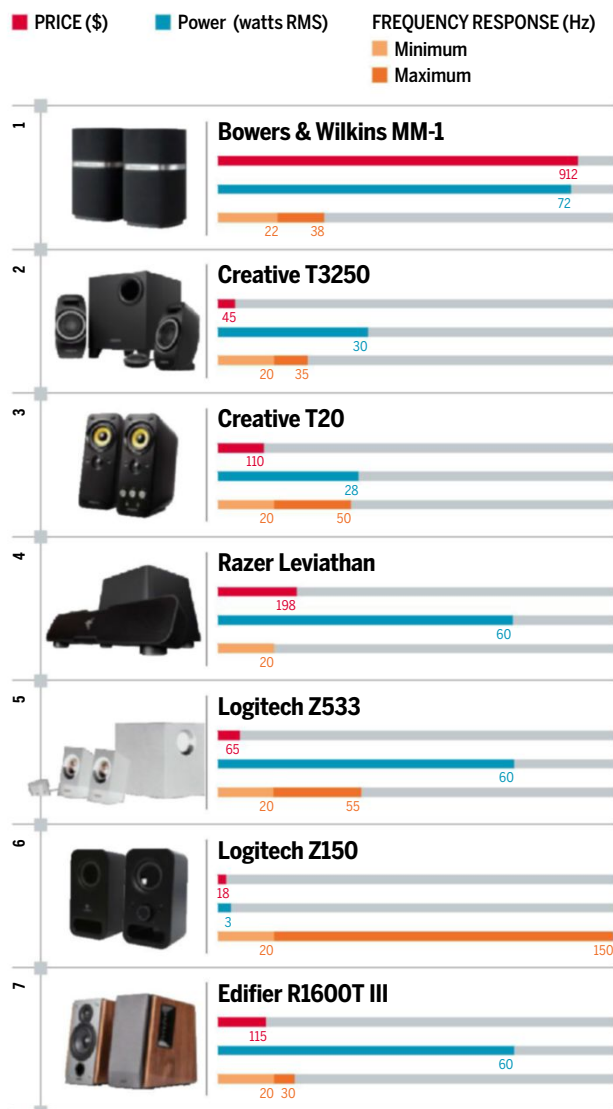
They also use some premium build materials, the real wood sides contrasting nicely with the silver/gray of the rest of the chassis and removable speaker covers.

For features you get two pairs of RCA sockets for inputs, joined by a mains power switch on the back. On the right side of the right speaker are the well-engineered bass, treble and volume knobs, plus there's a little IR remote with volume and mute.

With that extra size comes power and quality. For sheer bass oomph these kept up with all the sub-woofer equipped units other than the Leviathan. You also get a much more pronounced yet smooth and balanced mid-range and high-end. Hi-fi in look and price, these are fantastic if you have the space.

88%

STACKED UP



ESSENTIALS

	Speaker configuration	Satellite speaker dimensions (cm)
1	2.0	17 x 10 x 10
2	2.1	15 x 7 x 9
3	2.0	23 x 9 x 13.5
4	4.1 (soundbar + sub)	9.5 x 50 x 7
5	2.1	17 x 10 x 8.5
6	2.0	15 x 8.5 x 7.5
7	2.0	25.5 x 15 x 21

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.



BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL
\$1,020

MOTHERBOARD

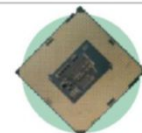


Z170-A Pro

MSI **\$114**

Our budget build's gone through an upgrade thanks to this new Z170 chipset. Plenty of expandability to upgrade in the future.

PROCESSOR



Core i3-6100

Intel **\$116**

Grants access to that brilliant Z170 chipset, is super energy efficient, and delivers meaty performance even in AAA titles.

GRAPHICS CARD



RX 480

AMD **\$280**

AMD's new budget card has incredible performance for the price, just pipping the GTX 970 in our benchmarking tests.

MEMORY



HyperX Fury Black 8GB @2133

Kingston **\$35**

DDR4 packs higher speeds, better energy efficiency, and larger capacities. 8GB is still king for most games however.

POWER SUPPLY



EVGA 500W 80PLUS Certified ATX12V/EPS12V

EVGA **\$45**

A reliable PSU with enough juice to run your CPU and a reasonably power-hungry GPU.

SSD



Torch LE 120GB SSD

Patriot **\$35**

This SSD is insanely cheap, and the perfect size to house your Windows system and most-used programs.

HDD



500GB 7200RPM HDD

Seagate **\$49**

500GB of additional storage for all your games and other programs. Spend a tiny bit more and you double its capacity.

CASE



Carbide 200R

Corsair **\$70**

The 200R gets the job done with toolless trays and plenty of space. ATX-sized, so you can upgrade that microATX board later.

DISPLAY

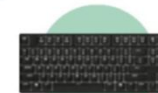


VS247HR 60Hz 1080p

Asus **\$137**

1080p resolution, 60fps—it's a monitor made for PC gamers. Coupled with the RX 480, playing on this will be silky smooth.

KEYBOARD



CM Storm QuickFire Rapid

Coolermaster **\$80**

A no-frills mechanical keyboard with a standard layout and Cherry switches. We recommend Browns or Reds for gaming.

MOUSE



Rival 100

Steelseries **\$32**

Steelseries' Rival lineup is ideal for those looking to get a quality gaming mouse at a respectable price.

CONTROLLER



Xbox 360 Wired Controller

Microsoft **\$27**

The king of controllers, and cheap at the price. When you're button-mashing, this USB device won't let you down.



MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
\$1,722

MOTHERBOARD

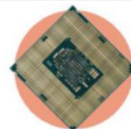


Z170 Pro Gaming

Asus **\$160**

The latest revision of our favorite gaming motherboard, with an M.2 PCIe x4 slot, Intel network port, USB 3.1 and SLI support.

PROCESSOR



i5-6600K

Intel **\$220**

Intel's new Skylake processor is nearly as fast as an i7 for gaming. Comes with some important memory/storage speed boosts.

GRAPHICS CARD



GTX 1070 FE

Nvidia **\$565**

The new king of midrange, this card is perfect for high refresh rate 1440p gaming, and gives you a monitor upgrade path.

COOLER



Kraken X31

NZXT **\$70**

To get the most out of a good CPU you need a cooler to match. The Kraken X31 is powerful, quiet and great for overlocks.

MEMORY



Savage Black 16GB @2400 MHz CAS 12

Kingston **\$81**

Thanks to insanely low timings, these two 8GB sticks of DDR4 are more than enough.

POWER SUPPLY



RMx 650W

Corsair **\$100**

Nothing like having a quality power supply. Get a decent cable kit for this one and you can easily spice up your rig.

SSD



850 EVO 250GB

Samsung **\$98**

Samsung retains its top spot on the SSD pile with the fantastically priced, very speedy 850 EVO. Still the best price/performance.

HDD

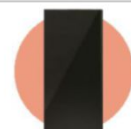


Caviar Blue 1TB 7200RPM

Western Digital **\$50**

SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you can handle.

CASE



S340

NZXT **\$75**

The stylish S340 has some nice touches, such as removable dust filters and space for huge liquid cooling radiators.

DISPLAY



Q2778VQE

AOC **\$250**

This entry-level 1440p monitor is perfect for those looking to upgrade from 1080p. It's cheap and still looks sleek.

KEYBOARD



K70 Vengeance

Corsair **\$110**

A great, full-size mechanical keyboard with an ergonomic wrist rest. We recommend Cherry Brown or Red switches for gaming.

MOUSE



Deathadder 2013

Razer **\$58**

There's not a huge range of price differences on the best mice, so stick with the best for your mid-range build too.



ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL
\$3,346

MOTHERBOARD



ROG Maximus VIII Hero

Asus **\$240**

Fantastic overclocking and stability, with a great UEFI BIOS from Asus. M.2, USB 3.1 and on-board power, reset, CMOS, etc, buttons.

PROCESSOR



Core i7-6700K

Intel **\$339**

Intel's new top-of-the-line Skylake processor. Its new chipset includes important memory/storage speed boosts.

GRAPHICS CARD



GTX 1080 Founder's Edition 8GB

EVGA **\$819**

Nvidia's GTX 1080 is the new king of the hill. Although a little pricey, this device is perfect for 4K gaming.

COOLER



Hydro H110i GT 280mm

Corsair **\$120**

Quiet, cool and capable of providing even the most aggressive overclocker with more than enough headroom to hit that 5GHz mark.

MEMORY



Savage Black 16GB @2400 MHz

Cas12
Kingston **\$81**

Thanks to insanely low timings, these two 8GB sticks of DDR4 are more than enough.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **\$151**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



950 Pro 256GB M.2 SSD

Samsung **\$181**

PCIe SSDs surpass the limitations of SATA, delivering speeds four times faster than traditional 2.5" variants.

SSD 2



850 Evo 1TB

Samsung **\$307**

Say goodbye to those slow old hard drives with this almost affordable 1TB SSD, perfect for all your games and media.

CASE



Noctis 450

NZXT **\$130**

Thanks to its innovative interior layout and daring design, this case is a pleasure to work in and a beauty to behold.

DISPLAY



PG279Q ROG Swift G-Sync

Asus **\$800**

165Hz, IPS, G-Sync, 27 inches of pure perfection. Don't let the price put you off, for the money this is a dream come true.

KEYBOARD



Ducky One

Ducky **\$120**

An elegant set of keys from mechanical keyboard fan favorite Ducky. Renowned for their impeccable feel and build quality.

MOUSE



Deathadder 2013

Razer **\$58**

Even if you've got money to burn, the Deathadder really is the best mouse you can buy right now.

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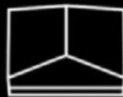
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